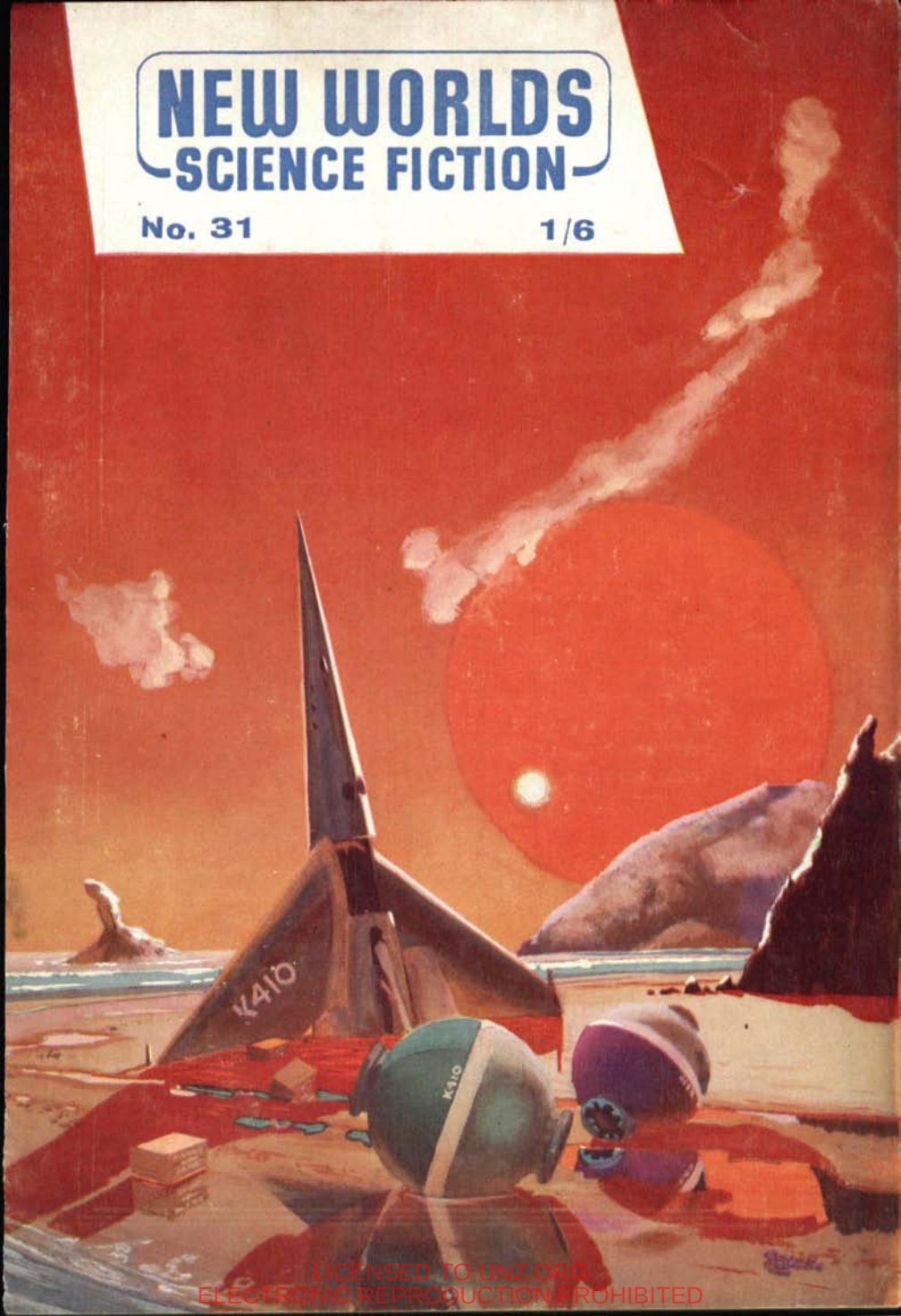
NEW WORLDS
SCIENCE FICTION

No. 31 1/6



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Charles Dye

New York, U.S.A.

Unfortunately, during the time at our disposal, it was not possible to learn much concerning the author of our current serial. In fact, Mr. Dye has apparently disappeared from human ken although he once stated that his major ambition was to go adventuring into the heart of Mexico and lower Yucatan. If, like Cortez, he has been attracted by the country of the ancient Aztecs, communications are likely to be slow.

Born in Hollywood, California, 1927, he found himself in the U.S. Air Force during the 1939-45 war and on his nineteenth birthday awoke to find himself in a hospital with a caved-in chest, the result of a naval air crash. It was the turning point in his life for, while recovering, he wrote his first short story. Since then he has had yarns in most of the science fiction magazines and many anthologies.

After release from the Armed Forces he turned his steps to the roaring concrete jungle of New York where our trail ends. Should Mr. Dye ever get in touch with us we shall be more than glad to fill in the gaps in his case-book.

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NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

VOLUME 11

No. 31

MONTHLY

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Cover painting representing a mystery of space travel

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Religion and Sex in S-F

I have just had a disagreement with author J. T. McIntosh concerning a recent change in editorial policy brought about through the present ludicrous situation in the British publishing field, whereby the original police drive against pornographical literature has overflowed into all classes of book and magazine publishing and no one publisher can be sure that he will not be prosecuted for the publication of some seemingly innocent references to our present morals and mode of life.

I maintain that while the present drive against immorality in literature continues and until Parliamentary legislation clarifies the position we shall not publish stories that could be misconstrued or lead to Court action. Jim McIntosh maintains that if every publisher thought the same as I do it would give the " purge " momentum—which has happened over " horror comics " now completely overshadowing the earlier clean-up of literature. Jim thinks that now is the time to make a stand against continued pressure because " we were getting to the stage where sex might become integral in a story, where authors wouldn't have to stop in mid-stream and consider that vital point. Now it looks as if we'll have to go back to the time when characters were not characterised, only typed."

The damnable part is that I agree with him ! Yet I haven't the courage of his convictions—certainly not to face a possible prison sentence for them !

The police have, very rightly, always been trying to stamp out the crude, raw type of fiction published to appeal solely to the baser instincts. In the not-so-distant past their hands were pretty well tied and the best they could manage was to confiscate the offending literature and hope to get a conviction against the publisher and distributor before a Magistrate's Court, usually resulting in a fine and costs. The primary idea was an attempt at making it too expensive for publishers so-minded to make a living. It worked—but not too successfully.

Eventually the Public Prosecutor won a case whereby imprisonment as well as heavy fines was part of the penalty for author, publisher, printer, and distributor. Upon the result of that case the whole machinery of censorship in the book and magazine field has evolved.

In one year it has swept numerous smaller publishers into the net, slowed down trade in ' questionable ' publications and even helped materially in putting some distributors out of business. It has in-

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volved numerous prominent publishing houses of repute in legal cases concerning such controversial books as *The Philanderer* and *September in Quinze* and one bookshop in the sale of the classic *Decameron* of Boccaccio, which raised a storm throughout the literary circles in this country.

At present police proceedings are being brought against publishers for the common law misdemeanour of publishing an obscene libel by an Act passed in 1857. It has been argued in Court by learned Council that what was alleged to be an obscene libel nearly one hundred years ago is not necessarily so today—but the Obscene Publications Act also has another approach in that it allows for the article itself to be seized and the shopkeeper or retailer who sells it to be prosecuted.

The situation has now reached almost farcical proportions insofar as each book when under censure is at the mercy of differing juries whose tastes may be so puritanical in outlook that they will find against the defendant, or as in the case of *The Image And The Search* published by William Heinemann & Son, twice appeared before different juries who could not agree upon a unanimous verdict.

Emphasis is placed upon the word *book* in the foregoing sentences because publishers of magazines and pocketbooks have decidedly had the worst of recent legal clashes while reputable publishers of case-bound books appear to have stood an even chance of defeating conviction.

This would appear to be mainly on the grounds that case-bound publications find their way into libraries of all classes where the readers are assumed to be virtuous citizens whose minds can assimilate the various aspects of sex without being perverted, while such paper-backed productions are alleged to lend themselves more readily to purchase by adolescent youth with a few shillings to spend and a burning desire to " know more about the ways of the world." Fictitious or otherwise.

Here again Jim McIntosh and I separate in our opinions but for rather different reasons. One of his books, already published in U.S.A., had a background theme about a human colony set in an alien environment to which their sexual and religious morals were changed to conform with a workable life under conditions almost totally dissimilar to those on Earth. Reviews in America were exceptionally good considering the delicate nature of the theme and Mr. McIntosh received several complimentary quotations from religious reviewers about his method of handling the complex situation. However, the English publisher did not view the novel in the same light and asked him to modify it " in view of the fact that science fiction in this country was read largely by juveniles and adolescents."

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As Jim states, " This was a shock. The book had never been meant to be read by adolescents. They could read it if they liked, but far from writing for young people I had been trying to get away from the juvenile approach which was always present in science fiction up to seven or eight years ago. Did this mean that one could never write science fiction purely for adults—that one had to write for children and simply hope some adults would read it ?"

I think the publisher's outlook on this subject is entirely inaccurate. Early returns from the " Survey " we conducted last month shows that the *average* age of our readership *is over thirty years*, and practically every reader has stated they belong to a library !

Questions were asked in the House of Commons on a number of occasions during the past year and M.P.'s eventually debated the whole problem of obscene publications including references to the current pressure on " horror comics." This debate was fully reported in the daily press and trade journals and most readers will know that no immediate alteration of the existing law is expected. While the setting up of a Committee or Commission to judge the moral or immoral issues of such publications put before them was considered to be an ideal worth attaining the practical application of any such project was deemed to be virtually impossible. There could be no concrete definition of " where the line was to be drawn."

So, censorship of publications continues to remain a hidden mystery in the hands of the police and the Public Prosecutor who will doubtless continue to apply pressure where they think they have a reasonable case for presentation before a Court of Law.

Science fiction and fantasy stories readily lay themselves open to the current close-scrutiny of the law because most plots are situated in a distant future where present-day morals, ethics and religious teachings could (hypothetically) have changed considerably. If an author sets a human social problem centred about characters living five hundred years from now he can assume that our present religious teachings have been wiped out by some disaster and humanity has evolved an entirely new code of morals, quite ethical under the social code he proposes for the basis of his plot.

He may assume that under such hypothetical laws a man may have three wives, or a woman four husbands, or the abolition of marriage as we know it. He can work in as fundamentals the current controversies of trial marriages, State-control of child-birth, voluntary euthansia, artificial insemination, and numerous other social codes not in practice today.

Such plot-pivots can be a cause of much dissention when reviewed

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in the light of our present-day social patterns although the main context of such futuristic stories may well be written in good taste. Under normal circumstances the ' good taste ' of an editor justifiably proud of a good-quality magazine would be sufficient censorship for any such story he published—but the present inconsistency in the law does not allow an editor or publisher any redress at all if the police decide that such a story is immoral in one sense or another.

I have no doubt that *New Worlds* is scrutinised just as closely as all other publications that regularly appear on the bookstalls—in fact, I personally know one Divisional Detective Inspector who has been a regular reader of this magazine for some years. Doubtless he would feel justified in putting " business " before " pleasure " if he thought the occasion warranted such an action.

Therefore despite the difference of opinion between Jim McIntosh and myself—and for the benefit of other authors—the present policy in our stories is that religion and sex should not be the central pivot upon which the story turns. Presumably women will feature just as prominently in the future history of the world as they have done in the past and there is no necessity for our stories to feature solely men, monsters and mechanical marvels. I have no doubt that procreation will continue in the time-honoured custom despite the advocation of artificial insemination or test-tube babies. There will still be human problems to solve whatever the Government, country, planet, or environment the future can possibly offer. To rule out sex entirely means that stories will be stultified and we shall no longer be reading about human beings reacting to those changing environments but about cardboard characters moving against a pseudo-scientific background.

Which is the last thing we want to publish in this magazine. To keep on the right side of the vagaries of the existing law, however, it is necessary to keep such controversial ideas sublimated to the plots and not dominating them. One day I might even be able to throw my blue pencil away for good. But not before some commonsense on the subject is forthcoming from Westminster.

John Carnell

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Possession is popularly reckoned to be nine points of the law. Difficulties arise, however, when two people equally share the possession of an item under dispute. In the following story Lan Wright poses a problem involving two races with colonisation claims upon a remote planet facing an almost insoluble political and economic crisis. There is a solution, of course. Albeit somewhat rugged.

FAIR EXCHANGE

By Lan Wright

Illustrated by HUNTER

Johnny Dawson's footsteps echoed along the white corridors of the Colonial Board offices as he made his way unhurriedly towards Hendrix's domain. The board was housed palatially in the giant SPACE building, and was part of the Spatial Projects and Colonial Exploration department, whose initials suitably named the huge forty story building which they occupied.

Hendrix was merely a cog in the great and influential wheel that was the Colonial Board, but he was a big enough cog to cause Dawson considerable heartburn and bother. The only time he wanted to see Dawson was when there was trouble about, and Dawson sensed trouble the moment he received Hendrix imperative summons.

The feeling of foreboding that had been with Dawson ever since that moment grew stronger the nearer he got to Hendrix office, and the moment he opened the inner door he knew that his fears were well founded.

Hendrix was chewing a large, black, unlighted cigar, and that in itself was a danger signal. He didn't say, 'Hello' or otherwise acknowledge the fact that he had not seen the younger man in over three months. He merely grunted when he saw who his visitor was, and swivelled round in his chair so that he could look

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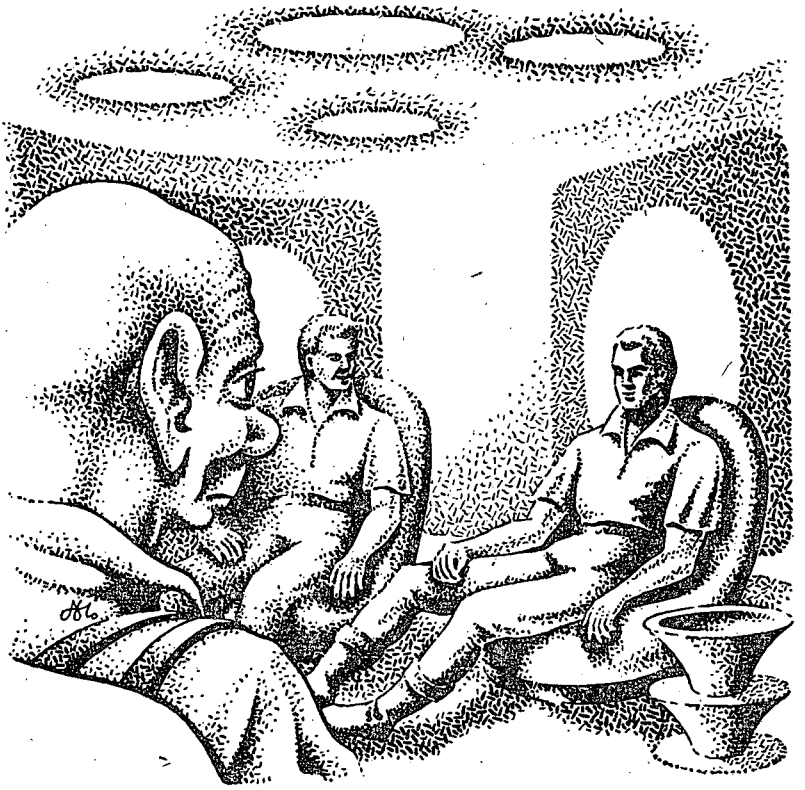

out of his office window across the sun-drenched vista of the city, his bulky form slumped untidily in the padded comfort of his chair.

"There are times, Dawson," he announced wearily, "when I wish I were dead."

"Me too," replied Dawson, but the innocence with which he said it denied the suspicious glance that Hendrix threw at him.

He sat down in a chair beside the desk and stretched his lean frame into a comfortable position.

"Ever hear of Venusian Swamp Fever?" asked Hendrix abruptly.

"Sure. I've had it twice."

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"How'd you get cured?"

"Oh, they pumped me full of some drug or other. Let's see—?"

"Betromicitine," Hendrix told him flatly. "Know where it comes from?"

Dawson frowned. "Vegetable extract, isn't it?"

"Uh—huh. There used to be a twenty seven percent death rate among Venusian colonists during the latter part of the last century. Then some scientists got to fooling around with some of the plants on a planet of the star Luther Four. From one of them they got an extract which they called Betromicitine, BTN for short."

Dawson shifted uneasily in his seat. He knew from long and often bitter experience that a lengthy explanation from Hendrix on any scientific subject was usually the forerunner of a problem.

Hendrix threw the cigar into the waste basket at the side of his desk and went on. "The planet in question is the fifth one in the Luther Four system and it is possessed territorially by the inhabitants of the second. It has no intelligent life of its own. Until about a month ago we've been getting all the BTN we wanted under a mutual trade agreement with the Lutherians. Then, with no warning, they cancelled the agreement and shoved the price to a point where it is economically and politically cheaper to let the population of Venus die of the Fever."

Dawson raised his eyebrows and whistled. "They'd never do that surely?"

Hendrix swivelled round sharply in his chair and planted his elbows firmly on the desk top. "Wouldn't they?" he countered. "They may have to. Just suppose we started paying what they are asking. Why, for the quantities of BTN we need it would cost better than thirty percent of our total export trade to the whole Galaxy. Terran economy wouldn't stand it."

"Do we export anything to Luther Four?"

"Sure. Machinery, textiles, some luxury goods and general merchandise. Nothing they can't do without."

"Meaning we can't raise the charges to them?"

"No, they'd just stop buying."

Dawson sat deep in thought while Hendrix brooded silently on the other side of the desk, his black eyes fixed unwinking on the younger man.

"I don't get it," said Dawson at last. "For best part of a century everything goes smoothly, and then—bingo! Just like that. Why?"

Hendrix nodded. "Good question. I wondered how long it

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would be before you asked it. Well, it so happens that by a million to one shot a Terran exploration party landed on the single planet of the star Elkan at precisely the same moment as a Lutherian expedition. As they landed on opposite sides of the planet there was no contact for some little time, but when there was, everything was settled nice and peacefully. There was an agreement that allowed for the equal division of Elkan, and that agreement has been in force nearly eighty years. In that time both the Lutherians and ourselves have built up considerable spheres of interest on the two main continental land masses. The Terran population numbers around the forty million mark, with a total capital interest amounting to nearly a hundred billion credits."

Hendrix paused and laid the palms of his hands flat upon the desk before him.

"Last year," he continued, "the Lutherians discovered a small vein of Stalumin near the coast of the main continent of their hemisphere." He cocked an eye at Dawson. "You have heard of Stalumin?"

Dawson ignored the sarcasm. "Hull plates for FTL ships," he returned briefly.

"Right. Anyway, they've traced the main seam out under the ocean bed, and they're pretty sure that it follows a geological fault in the substrata of the planet before finally coming to the surface in fairly large quantities on the Terran side. Naturally, we've got geologists looking for it, but with so little to go on it may be months or even years before they spot it. In the meantime the Lutherians are putting on a big 'Elkan for the Lutherians' act, based on a claim that they got there first and that, therefore, the planet is theirs by right of prior conquest."

"I get it," broke in Dawson. "Either we give them Elkan or we don't get any BTN."

"Bright boy," sneered Hendrix. "Only it isn't as simple as that. First, we can't get off Elkan because we've got too much at stake. The livelihood of forty million Terrans is tied up in the place, and it would cost us almost as much economically as it would to evacuate Venus."

He grinned humourlessly at Dawson.

"You've got a free hand, Dawson. You can do what you like and go where you like. All we want is the answer to the riddle."

Dawson digested the situation glumly during the long, pregnant silence that followed.

"I could resign," he said at last.

"I'll have you fired first," growled Hendrix, "and you know what that would mean."

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"Yeah. I'd be digging ditches for the rest of my life." Dawson lifted his hands and sighed with expressive resignation. "Okay, boss. I'll make Elkan my first stop, and may the Lord have mercy on my soul."

"He'd better, because I won't," grinned Hendrix.

Ten days later Dawson landed on the single planet of the star Elkan.

The Terran spaceport was on the outskirts of the capital city and main centre of population, New London. The city itself was a modern, well spread city of nearly two million people, and it was divided into two main sections. The largest section was entirely residential, a well planned garden city with wide, tree-lined avenues and scores of parks and open places. The buildings were low, white structures after the latest colonial style of Terran architecture, and each dwelling house stood in its own grounds.

The other part was quite different.

It lay on the north bank of the large river which divided New London in two, and it was a streamlined, ultra modern business and manufacturing centre, super-efficient and largely robotic. In it was concentrated the industrial power of half the planet. It was the co-ordinating centre for a hundred other trading posts and manufacturing centres spread through the rest of the Terran hemisphere.

Here, day after day, year in, year out, the life blood of half a world flowed with ever increasing force and power.

Hugo Walton, the governor of the Terran hemisphere, eyed Dawson grimly from the comfort of an arm chair in his private office.

"A hundred billions in capital investment, and expanding at the rate of two billions a year. That's why we can't give up this planet, Dawson. It would be cheaper to fight a war."

Walton was a big man with a massive, leonine head of red hair, ice blue eyes, and the personality of half a dozen ordinary men. The whole effect, Dawson decided, was rather overpowering. That it was a successful effect he did not doubt, but it could not cover up entirely the fact that Walton was not as bright as a man in his position should have been.

"Do you think it'll come to war?" he asked.

Walton shrugged. "I don't know. Arvan, the Lutherian governor, is a good friend of mine, but he won't tell me anything. I've tried talking to him about it, but it's quite clear he's obeying orders. All he says is that there is no point in discussing the

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matter with me. The situation, he says, is clear, and it's up to the government on Earth to do something about it."

"But why a threat of Galactic war over a stupid vein of metal on an obscure planet like this?"

"I don't know," confessed Walton. "We all know how valuable Stalumin is. There's only one other known vein at present, and that is on the second planet of the star Alpha Centauri, firmly in Terran hands. All the Lutherians have is about ten thousand tons that we let them have before it was realised how valuable a metal it was. Since then, of course, there's been a total embargo on it for trading purposes because all supplies have been earmarked for the new stellar cruisers. The Lutherians are still using steel alloys for the hull plates of their ships, and they know what a terrific advantage in space flight and stellar exploration we shall have when the whole scheme gets fully under way.

"This new seam, if they can control it, puts them right back in the picture on equal terms with us. I can only assume that is why they are making the stakes so high."

Dawson glowered gloomily at the ornate carpet between his feet. The more he heard about the whole affair the less he liked it, for there seemed to be so many parts missing. As it stood at present there seemed no way out short of provoking a Terran-Luther war which would be disastrous to all concerned.

"What's the general position here?" he asked at last.

"Wary. No incidents. Trade as usual, except that none of the raw material for BTN is coming through. We've cut tourist trips to the Lutherian side, but apart from that everything is normal."

"Could I get across to the Lutherian side to have a look?"

Walton eyed him with obvious surprise. "Sure you could. They will probably watch you closely, but they won't hinder you. Do you think it'll help you much?"

"You never know. At the moment there are too many unfilled spaces in the puzzle. I can't get a proper picture until some more of them have been completed. A look on the other side of the fence might be useful."

"Well, I've been told to give you a free hand," Walton told him. "Anything I can do to help, just ask for it. It's your problem though." He gave the impression that he was glad that it was Dawson's problem and that he wanted nothing to do with it. Privately, Dawson agreed with him.

He rose wearily from the chair and breathed deeply, letting the air out again in a long sigh. "You'd better keep tuned to the newscasts," he told Walton. "I may decide to commit suicide and you'll want to know."

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Dawson spent the rest of his first day on Elkan taking in the local scenery and meeting other men of importance in the Terran community. He tried the police commissioner, the secretary of the local governing council, and several of the larger business chiefs. Everywhere he went the story was the same. All of them were worried about the mounting tension, and all of them were resigned to the fact that whatever happened someone was going to get hurt. The only concrete thing he learned was that none of them were willing to give up the planet to stop a war.

By the end of the day, when he retired to his hotel room, Dawson had an aching head and an acute feeling of depression. Every way he looked at it the situation was hopelessly entangled. If Earth wanted BTN she had to give up Elkan. If she gave up Elkan she gave up a hundred billions of capital investment and an unguessable amount of raw materials and future unrealised assets. Also, she lost her lead in the race for stellar colonisation.

If she stuck and refused to barter, the lives of three hundred millions of Venusian colonists would cease to be an insurable risk. Emigration to that world would cease, and the whole vast mineral of the planet would be as good as lost for the sake of a few thousand tons of otherwise useless violet-coloured vegetable matter.

During the trip from Earth Dawson had studied up on BTN, and he found that it was a vegetable extract from a plant that grew wild on the fifth planet of Luther Four. The peculiar atmospheric conditions (in which chlorine was the main ingredient) coupled with a soil that had pulverised lava as its base, was mainly responsible for the plant's existence, and try as they might, Terran scientists had been unable to duplicate the conditions so as to guarantee a sufficiently large output for the heavily populated colony. Without it, death was a three to one chance.

"Three months stock," Hendrix told him grimly. "After that the colonists start dropping like flies."

Dawson groaned, turned out the light at the side of his bed, and buried his head in the soft pillow.

The next morning he called Walton on the visiphone.

"Can you fix me a meeting with the Lutherian governor?"

Walton frowned. "Might be a bit tricky. Is it important?"

"Might be. Like I said yesterday, a look on the other side of the fence might be useful."

"How soon?"

"Sooner the better. If I can get a plane right away I could see him tonight."

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"All right," nodded Walton. "Book a private plane and then call me back. I'll tell you if I've managed it."

By the time Dawson had been to the airfield and hired a small, fast stratoplane and pilot, Walton had fixed an appointment, and four hours later Dawson was gazing despondently at the approaching coast line of the Lutherian continent.

The jet swept down over the sea, crossing the coast at a few thousand feet preparatory to landing. Like New London the Lutherian capital, Krantar, was a coastal port built astride a wide river. Unlike New London it spread its buildings and its population over a sprawling area three times as large as that of its Terran counterpart. All the buildings were single storied boxes with eliptical doors and windows, and each was as exactly like its neighbour as it was possible for uniform architecture to attain. The streets were all long and straight and wide, and each one was devoted entirely to one form or another of social existence. One would be completely residential, another entirely devoted to entertainment, and a third made up of shops and stores. The uniformity of design and construction was, at first, surprising to a Terran visitor, later it was irritating, and later still it was utterly boring.

The landing field was on the outskirts of the city, and as the plane taxied to a halt outside the low, white mass of the control building, Dawson was surprised to find an Earthman waiting for him.

He descended from the plane and moved away from it towards the entrance of the control centre when the man broke away from the watching crowds of Lutherians and crossed leisurely towards him. As he reached Dawson he smiled and held out his hand.

"Mr. Dawson? My name is Parker. Governor Walton called me to take you in hand and help you all I can."

Dawson shook hands. "Nice of him. You think I'll need—er—taking in hand?"

Parker smiled and fell into step beside him. "No, but you may need a bit of help. Earthmen aren't exactly popular at the moment round here. Not that anyone's been lynched yet, but—well, it's best to have someone around who knows the local colour and atmosphere."

Dawson reflected that the slender, elegant young man wasn't quite the fool that his pallid face and innocent grey eyes made him out to be. Mr. Parker was probably going to be quite an asset when he met the Lutherian governor.

The watching crowds of Lutherians opened up a path for them as they approached. It was Dawson's first sight of the stumpy,

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round-faced race, and he was not impressed. Not one of them was over about five feet tall, and all of them, male and female, had the baldest heads it was possible to imagine.

"Dammit, they look like fugitives from a kid's fairy tale book. Elves, gnomes—"

"Don't let them fool you," broke in Parker. "They're tough, hard bargainers and sound business people. I'd sooner trust one of them than a good many Terrans I know. Don't make any mistake about it, if they have to fight then they'll fight."

The crowd closed in around them. Wide, round, jet black eyes, almost luminous and coldly appraising, brought an edge of uneasiness to Dawson's nerves, for there was no mistaking the hostility in the silent, watching groups.

He and Parker stood a good foot taller than any of the gnomes around them, but the advantage in size was not reassuring. The short, rotund figures looked astonishingly agile for all their ungainly shape.

Parker led him through the wide hall of the control building, ushered him through an efficient, brief and hostile customs check, and out into the wide avenues that ran into the heart of the city. He had a ground car waiting, and as they climbed into it he said, "Your appointment with the governor is for seven o'clock local time, that's in two hours. You've got time to freshen up at my hotel and then I'll take you to a Lutherian restaurant for a meal. It'll give you a chance to look at the race you've got to deal with before you meet the governor. I can tell you a bit about the governor's outlook at the same time."

Promptly at five to seven Parker ushered Dawson into the main entrance hall of the governor's residence. It was a sprawling private house on the sea front, with broad, straight corridors leading off the main hall in all directions and with the same regularity as the streets outside. The hostility of the Lutherian who greeted them was, by now, familiar to Dawson. It had followed from the airport to Parker's hotel, and it had manifested itself even more strongly in the attitude of the waiters and the other customers in the large restaurant where Parker had taken him to eat. It followed them like a pall wherever they went, and it set a raw edge of irritability on Dawson's nerves that robbed him of whatever appetite he had had.

Parker seemed unperturbed.

They left the restaurant in an aura of frostiness, and as they reached the street Dawson swore luridly.

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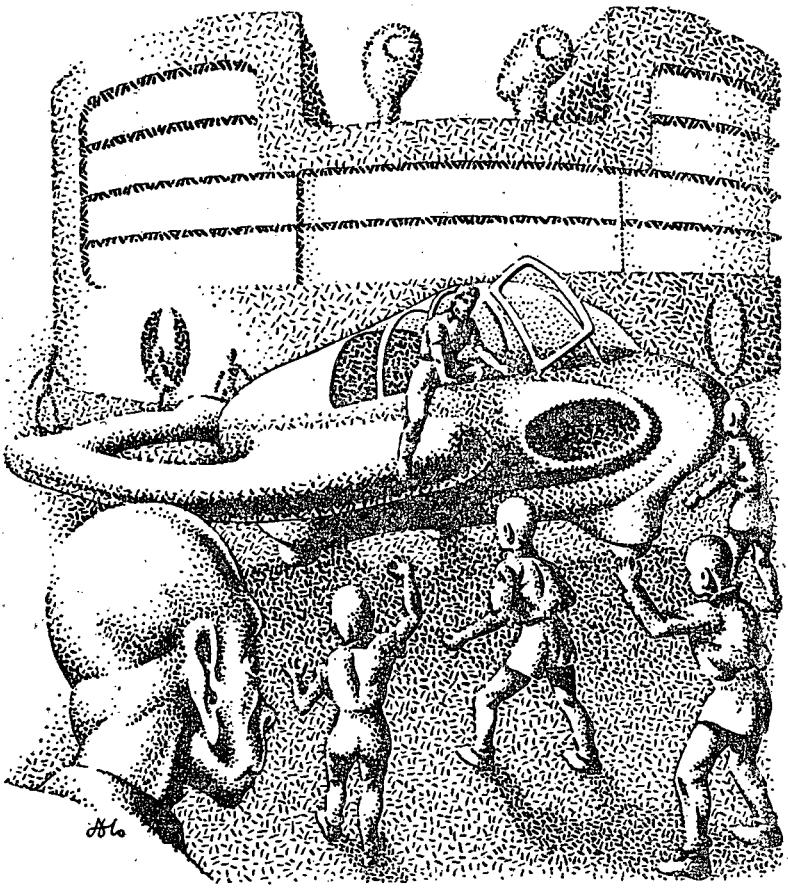

"For two pins I'd go back in there and punch a few of those button noses," he growled. "Hell, I don't know how you stand it."

Parker grinned. "When you live here you have to," he replied simply. "Dignity of the race and so on."

"Dignity be damned. Anyone would think we were the aggressors in this argument instead of them."

Parker turned and looked at him from serious grey eyes. "What makes you think we're not?" he asked.

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Dawson was dumbfounded. "But—"

"Look. When you meet Arvan try and remember that he is a sincere and honest alien, and try to remember also that all you have heard about the situation between the two races has been told you by people who are prejudiced because of one thing—they are Earthmen." He grinned suddenly. "I'm an Earthman too, but I've lived with these people for three years. I'm even more on the spot than Hugo Walton."

Arvan was big for a Lutherian. He was about five feet four and proportionately bigger all round. His round, moon face was quite expressionless as he greeted them with the imported Terran hand-shake, but for once there was not the open hostility in his manner that had so characterised Dawson's first impression of his race.

He motioned them to two low, armless chairs, built so low to the floor that Dawson either had to stretch his legs straight out before him or tuck them up under his chin. It had a webbed back and seat of flexible fibre which moulded comfortably to his form as he relaxed in it.

"You have a saying, Mister Dawson," began Arvan slowly, "about getting to the point quickly." He spoke good English, slowly and carefully, but with a peculiar slurring accent as if his mouth was deformed. He continued, "You have come from Earth to seek a solution to the problem that confronts our two races."

Dawson nodded, "That is so."

"May I presume that you have been given orders from higher authorities?"

"You may." Dawson felt an odd wariness prickle the hairs at the back of his neck, for the interview was not proceeding at all in the direction he had expected.

"Then I would be right in thinking that those orders were that you should find a solution which does not in any way prejudice or injure the human race?"

The black eyes were unwinking and devoid of any emotion as they bored into Dawson's discomfort. He flashed a quick glance at Parker, but the man was sitting sphinx-like beside him. He looked back at Arvan quite unable to think of any reply to the accusation.

"Do you consider yourself to be an honest man, Mister Dawson?" Only the gravity of the Lutherian's voice and the total lack of sarcasm in his accent belied the offence which Dawson would normally have felt to so direct a question.

He flushed. The whole conversation was getting quite beyond

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him and he felt completely out of his depth. His idea in arranging the interview at all had been to learn as much as he could about the other side, but in a few short minutes he had learned nothing and had been utterly outmanoeuvred by the plump, serious alien opposite him.

"I try to be," he replied at last.

"From your knowledge, then, does it seem likely to you that we of the Lutherian race would precipitate a disastrous war simply because of a dispute over a single vein of scarce metal on an obscure planet?"

Dawson drew a deep breath of relief. This was more like it.

"That is one of my reasons for wishing to meet you," he replied. "The motives behind your sudden change of heart and your recent actions have not been made clear to me by my own people. It may be that they do not understand them. Therefore, I decided that the only way in which any sort of settlement could be reached was, first and foremost to learn all the facts from both sides."

Arvan nodded. "You are a wise man, Mister Dawson. It is a pity that others of your race are not so wise. Do you know to what lengths in the past my race has gone to meet yours in peaceful and friendly contact?"

Again the uneasiness crept over Dawson. Arvan was too calm and not sufficiently demanding for Dawson to feel anything but a growing fear that the whole business might be even more complicated than he had been led to believe. He shook his head mutely to Arvan's question.

"Then you are probably not aware," continued the Lutherian, "that this world belongs to my people legally, by right of prior discovery."

Dawson sat up sharply, startled by the all too obvious mis-statement. He recalled Hendrix remark about a big 'Elkan for the Lutherians' act, and here it was right out in the open.

"That's ridiculous. It was a case of joint discovery and landing, and the ultimate disposition of the planet was decided by mutual arbitration. Why, our records show clearly—"

"Your records?" The Lutherian was gently disparaging as he interrupted. "Your records, Mister Dawson, were false from the very beginning. They show only what your government at the time wanted them to show.

"Our expedition landed on Elkan a full thousand hours local time before your craft put in an appearance. I am afraid that the leaders of your own expedition were so eager to reap the rewards which their discovery would bring that they altered every record

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and every instrument to agree with their statement of joint discovery. Not unnaturally your government believed them and upheld their claim. After all," he laughed gently, a tinkling, alien sound, "it is unthinkable that an Earthman should lie and cheat over such a serious subject. It could only be that the aliens were liars and cheats. The whole situation had all the indications of a major political break, and so we agreed to put the matter to arbitration. Thus, in the cause of peace, we gave up half a planet, but that was a long time ago, nearly a hundred of your years, and since then we have learned the true nature of your race.

"Now, as a result of what we have learned, the position has changed. For decades we have watched your race expanding through the Galaxy in every direction. We have seen four other races, smaller than our own swallowed up in the tide of Terran discovery and conquest. Two of those races are now dead." He looked speculatively at Dawson, "No doubt you have heard of the Alvori and the Kalakora? During all this time our own spheres of interest have become smaller in proportion to the Terran colossus which surrounds us, until now we have come to see that in a few centuries, maybe less, the very existence of our race will be threatened. Unless we are strong now we may very well follow the Alvori and the Kalakora to extinction." He gestured briefly with one pudgy hand. "Our first stand had to be made somewhere, and so we have chosen that it should be made here, at the point of closest contact between our races. We need Stalumin for our own development, but that is not the true reason for our actions. If you came here seeking the truth, Mister Dawson, I think that you have found it."

Arvan stopped speaking and a heavy, electric silence fell over the wide, low room. Dawson's mind was a turmoil of disbelief and stupefaction. At first he had dismissed the Lutherian's remarks as being utterly ridiculous, but there was an element of sincerity in the alien's manner that cast doubts on his first judgment. And if it were true? He felt a momentary tremor of fear at what he was mixed up in if it were true. He, Johnny Dawson, had to stop an almost inevitable inter-stellar war.

He turned abruptly to Parker. "Is all this true?" he demanded. "About the discovery of Elkan, I mean."

Parker smiled wryly. "I couldn't prove it," he answered. "But I'd vouch for the honesty of one of my Lutherian friends against any power-mad Terran explorer."

Dawson relaxed, remembering Parker's warnings about prejudice earlier on.

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He turned to Arvan again. "You are trying to tell me," he said, "that this isn't just a minor dispute between our races. You are saying that your race is fighting for its very existence and there will be war if Earth doesn't back down."

Arvan nodded wordlessly.

Dawson felt suddenly sick and angry that he had to come all the way into enemy territory to find out the truth about what was going on. Ten short minutes had been enough to disillusion him on the ethics of the situation. The trouble was simply that Earth was getting too big for her boots, and unless she climbed down . . .

He stood up abruptly. "Thank you for your courtesy in seeing me," he said stiffly. "I appreciate your point of view." He gestured awkwardly. "I'll try to find a reasonable way out if I can, but—"

"You are an Earthman." Arvan, too, had risen. "You will act in the interests of your race no matter what your private thoughts may be. That is the greatest of all loyalties—loyalty to one's race. Goodbye, Mister Dawson."

Dawson flushed. He felt ashamed for he knew that Arvan was right.

"Come on, Parker. Let's get home."

Hugo Walton twiddled uncomfortably with a silver pencil as Dawson stalked angrily up and down the thick carpet before his desk.

"Well," he said placatingly. "I wouldn't give too much credence to rumours."

"Rumours, you call them?" echoed Dawson. "Look, Walton, I'm a big boy now. I know when there's something wrong and Arvan wasn't lying. You are Johnny-on-the-Spot around here and should have been able to tell just what the trouble was."

"Well, I—"

"Instead of which you let me find out from an alien just what sort of dirty, stinking mess I've fallen into."

"I figured Hendrix would have scotched stories like that before you ever set out."

"Hendrix!" Dawson's tone was scathing. "He probably knows as little about it as I did until twelve hours ago." He thrust his hands deep into his jacket pockets and began his interrupted walk back and forth across the carpet. "I don't know. I beat my brains to a pulp on the trip back, and all I can see is that either Earth gives up this planet—"

"Impossible."

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"—or Venus can be written off."

Walton tutted disgustedly.

"Failing either of those alternatives there's going to be one hell of a war breaking out in a few months." Dawson made for the door. "First thing I'm going to do is get drunk."

In three days Dawson became a legendary figure in the bars and hotels of New London. His capacity for any and every form of intoxicating liquor known to man was a matter of wonder to every bar-tender in the city, and if his eyes became bloodshot and his cheeks flushed during the course of an evening, his step was as steady and his speech as unimpaired when he left as it was when he arrived.

On the evening of the fourth day of his monumental jag he left the bar of the Angel Room at eleven o'clock—two hours before he need—and announced his intention of retiring early with a bottle of Terran vodka to aid his slumbers.

At eight the next morning the burring of the visiphone at the side of his bed shuddered through his half awakened being in waves of sheer agony. He groaned and buried his pounding head deeper in the pillow. The burring persisted with maddening regularity.

He rolled over and sat up, clutching his head between his hands as the movement sent a spasm of nausea rolling round his stomach. Feebly and without opening his eyes he fumbled for the switch to complete the connection, and as he found it Walton's voice came over the speaker, sharp and imperative.

"What the hell have you been doing, Dawson? I've been calling you for the last five minutes."

Dawson peered, squinting with displeasure at the tiny picture of Walton. "Sorry, I've been sleeping. What do you want?"

"Hendrix is calling from Earth in about half an hour. The call is being relayed through this office but I expect it's you he'll want to talk to."

Dawson sat up abruptly, his eyes wide and staring blankly at the wall beyond the phone.

"Copper!" he shouted.

Walton gaped at him from the screen. "What did you say?"

"Copper," bellowed Dawson, switching his attention back to the governor. "Sure, I'll come right down, Walton. I'm a low down, crawling sonofabitch, but I'll come right away. Copper! Know anything about copper, Walton?"

"You're drunk. You'd better—"

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"I met a man last night," continued Dawson unheeding. "He knew a lot about copper. Taught me a lot I never knew before." He grinned at Walton's grim disgust. "Yes, I know. I'll be late."

He broke the connection and dived for the bathroom.

The ride down to Walton's office in a cab did a lot to clear his head, and it gave him time to marshall his thoughts as well. He was in a reasonable, if grimly determined frame of mind when he got there. Walton was waiting in his office and he eyed Dawson with disfavour as he entered.

"I hope you're pleased with your antics of the past few days." His voice exuded contempt.

"Shut up," replied Dawson coldly. "I'm the boy who is going to pull your chestnuts out of the fire, Walton, so be nice to me because I'm not happy about the way it's going to be done and I might change my mind. I've got to live with myself for years when this is all over, and I'm going to hate what I'm going to do. The only way I can soften that hate is pass some of the blame off on to you and Hendrix, and all the other rotten, dirty, bloated politicians who are responsible for this mess."

Walton's face was white and angry. "Now, look here—"

"Quiet and listen to me for a minute before that call comes through. How many Lutherian cargo cruisers can you hire in the next month?"

Walton's jaw dropped in sheer surprise. "What?"

"Can you get fifty?"

"Well, yes. We could get a hundred."

"Fine. Then get them and hang on to them until I tell you what to do with them."

"But what's wrong with Terran ships?"

"Just that. They're Terran."

The visiphone on Walton's desk buzzed its warning note, and the governor leaned forward to press the receiving switch.

"Earth calling," announced the speaker. "Person to person for Governor Walton. Limit two and one half minutes."

As Dawson slid into a seat beside Walton the small screen shimmered and brightened, and the heavy features of Hendrix appeared slightly distorted.

"Hello, boss," Dawson greeted him.

"What the devil are you up to, Dawson?" demanded Hendrix.

"I suppose Hugo has been shopping me," grinned Dawson, looking sidewise at Walton's scandalised scowl.

"Never mind that, what progress have you made?"

"None, yet."

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"Now look here, Dawson—"

"Hold on. I said, 'Yet'," broke in Dawson. "Listen to me for a minute, we haven't much time." He leaned nearer the small screen. "How much is copper in the open market?"

Hendrix eyes bulged and his jaw clamped sharply round the thick butt of his cigar. "Quit the quiz. We've got two minutes."

"How much?" insisted Dawson.

Hendrix eyes narrowed evilly. "Well—around fifteen credits a ton."

"Can you get immediate authority for the purchase of a quarter of million tons?"

"Are you crazy?" howled Hendrix.

"Raving," agreed Dawson calmly. "Can you get it?"

"I can try. What if I do?"

"You'll do it, and you'll ship it here, to Elkan, as fast you can."

The cigar vanished as Hendrix mouth opened wide in vacant astonishment.

"And don't ask questions," snapped Dawson. "I think I've got the answer to the problem out here, but I haven't got all the details worked out yet. If I'm wrong, well, all you'll have lost will be freight charges on a quarter of a million tons of copper."

"I'll have your skin for a drumhead if this turns out wrong," said Hendrix grimly. "All right. You can expect deliveries to start in two weeks."

"Anything else?"

"Not a thing. I'll be writing your dismissal papers to pass the time." Hendrix grinned nastily, and then, abruptly, his face faded as the connection was cut.

Dawson leaned back in his chair and rubbed his hands down over his bleary-eyed, unshaven face.

"Would you mind telling me what this is all about?" Walton's voice was icily calm. "What are you going to do with quarter of a million tons of copper?"

"Nothing yet," replied Dawson. "First of all you're going to get in touch with Arvan and inform him that Earth is going to hand over Elkan to Luther as of next month. The first is as good a date as any."

"What?" Walton's voice echoed the horror in his face. "You can't do that. I'll have you arrested—"

"You can't," interrupted Dawson coldly. "I'm the possessor of special immunity from the Terran Colonisation Board, and as their representative you'll do as I say—or else."

"But this is madness," yelped Walton.

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Dawson rubbed his hands across his eyes in a sudden gesture of impatience.

"Nevertheless, you'll do it. You'll tell him that as of the first of the month Elkan will be a Lutherian colony, but that it will be some months before Earth can evacuate entirely. Tell him that the question of compensation for unremoved assets can be decided later. If I judge the Lutherians right they won't mind a few details like that. By the time you've got the date set for the hand-over most of the copper will have arrived, and you can off-load it and store it for the time being. On the first I'll tell you what to do with it."

He got up from behind the desk and walked out of the office leaving a speechless Walton behind him. It was eight fifty, and he thought dully that the fate of the planet had been decided in twenty minutes.

The first of June on the Terran calendar dawned brilliantly over the mountains of Elkan. The parent sun flooded the valley in which Dawson had lost himself with soft, reddish yellow light, and the sky above was only partly shadowed by the red tinted, high flying clouds.

For nearly three weeks Dawson had been in the hinterland of the Terran continent. He had disappeared from New London the day after Walton's public announcement that "the special investigator from Earth, John Dawson, has decided in the interests of peace that Elkan should become a Lutherian colony."

The only happy person he saw before he left the city was on the visiphone when Arvan had called him from Krantar.

"I misjudged you, Mister Dawson," the governor had said. "I did not believe that any Earthman would be willing to make a sacrifice such as this in the interests of peace. Your race and mine will be closer friends for what you have done today."

Dawson had smiled coldly and mechanically into the phone.

"Yes, I'm a good samaritan all round," he had answered. "Right now, though, I think a few of the local gentry would very much like to get their hands on me. I wish I was as friendly with my race as I am with yours."

"It will come in time," Arvan assured him. "To us you will always be a friend. Goodbye, and thank you."

The screen had cleared and Dawson had gone out and drunk himself insensible. That night he had sneaked out, unnoticed, for the hills.

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As he left the small rented bungalow where he had been living under an assumed name Dawson recalled Arvan's words. He laughed humourlessly and wondered what the Lutherian would have to say to him when next they met—if they ever did. A savage burst of self revulsion and hatred made him send the small car hurtling along the road towards the nearest village.

From a phone booth he called Walton's office, and a secretary put him straight through to the governor without comment.

"Dawson! Where are you?" Walton demanded. "We've been looking all over for you."

"What for? To string me up?" asked Dawson bitterly. "Listen, you are to have that copper loaded into the Lutherian ships you hired and ship it off to Luther as fast as you can. Let the crews know what they're carrying and tell them to come back for another load if they possibly can. I figure the first shipload will reach Luther in about nine days, so I'll get back to New London in a fortnight. If the crews of those ships are worried about the legal position I'm sure you'll be able to put them wise."

Walton's face was a mixture of amazement and sudden understanding as Dawson finished. "But, Dawson, if this—"

"So long, Walton. See you in a couple of weeks." Dawson broke the connection and returned to his car.

He stayed in the wilds for another fifteen days, walking miles each day through the virgin, slightly alien countryside. He slept heavily at night, worn out by the excessive exercise, and only very occasionally were his slumbers disturbed by nightmares. All the while he kept watch for the searchers whom he knew must be looking for him.

Half a dozen times during the last three or four days he was tempted to call Walton and see what was going on, and each time he had to stifle his curiosity. Deep within himself he knew all too well just what was going on, and the thoughts sent him raging through the alien forests around the bungalow in perfect ecstasies of self loathing.

On June sixteenth he packed his two bags and began the trip back to New London at eight in the morning. That someone had recognised him during his brief stop for lunch was clear, for two police vehicles met him some twenty miles from the city and escorted him directly to the governor's residence.

Walton was waiting for him in his private office when he arrived, and his face was taut and pale under the weeks of strain which he had obviously been labouring.

"Why didn't you confide in me from the start?" was his first question.

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Dawson shrugged wearily. "Too many tongues—"

"Dammit, man. I've been working in the dark up till two weeks ago, and I've had a hell of a job explaining it to the Board. They backed you up of course, but I've had to take the brunt of their displeasure because you weren't here."

"My heart bleeds for you."

Walton flushed. "Anyway, do you think it'll work?"

"I don't know. I expect so." Dawson slumped into a chair. "Are there any reports yet?"

"No. Everything from Parker and my other agents has been censored out of existence. Something's going on, but what—"

"Well, that's good enough. Can I stay here till it's all over?"

"You'd better," Walton told him grimly. "I won't be responsible for your safety outside these walls."

"Seems I'm everybody's favourite."

He stayed at Walton's residence for three days waiting for something to happen. In New London itself it was clear that word of his return had got around, and small groups of people gathered unobtrusively around the square in front of the building showed that it would be most unwise for him to attempt to go out. He brooded alone in his room for most of the time, smoking heavily and getting morbidly drunk on Walton's stocks of Terran liquor.

It was midday on June twentieth when a secretary called him to Walton's office.

He found the governor pacing the carpet his face red with suppressed tension and his eyes glinting with anticipation.

"Arvan's calling in a few moments. You'd better sit in on it and see what he's got to say." The strain of waiting etched itself clearly in the tense lines around Walton's nose and mouth. He looked thinner and more pallid than usual despite his high colour and Dawson figured that the same signs must be showing to an even greater degree on his own features.

Even as he sat down the phone buzzed and Walton pressed the receiving switch. Dawson pulled his chair round beside the governor's in time to see the round, plump face of Arvan swim into view. Even with the distortions of the phone service and the concealing blacks and greys of the screen, the Lutherian's face revealed all too clearly that something serious had been taking his whole attention for some time. His sunken eyes, larger and rounder than ever, gazed almost reproachfully and with infinite sadness at Walton.

"You may guess the reason for my call, Governor Walton?" he said in his usual slow, careful voice.

Walton nodded mutely.

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Arvan was silent for several long moments as if gathering himself for a particularly distasteful task, his eyes dropping with sad expressiveness to the desk before him, which was just visible within the range of the screen.

At last he said, "I have to tell you that the Lutherian government will undertake to renounce all rights to the Terran portion of the planet Elkan, and will, further, guarantee to supply all the raw material for the drug BTN at the price and under the conditions ruling four Terran months prior to this date." He paused and lifted his eyes to look directly at Walton. "The only condition to this treaty—" he gestured feebly with one hand, "—you may already know."

Walton's face was a picture of relief and satisfaction.

"Yes," he replied quickly. "Yes, Arvan. No further shipments of copper will be permitted to leave, and all ships en route to Luther will be diverted and sent back here by a destroyer force which has been standing off Luther in anticipation of this need."

Arvan nodded slowly. "Thank you." His voice was cold and formal. "And now, is Mister Dawson with you?"

For answer Walton drew aside and allowed Dawson to move into the range of the screen.

Arvan looked at him for a long time, his face empty of emotion his eyes steady and unwinking on Dawson's thin, tight-lipped face. The Lutherian moved at last. "I told you once, Mister Dawson, that you would always act in the interests of your own race. I said then that loyalty to one's race was the greatest of all loyalties. Unfortunately, I forgot my own words." He paused. "It may interest you to know that the latest reports from Luther speak of an almost complete paralysis in the economic and business life of the planet. There has been rioting and considerable loss of life around those spaceports where the copper has been landed. The government has fallen and no one has yet been able to form another. All public utilities are at a standstill because the employees are busy seeking valueless wealth at the spaceports. Without exception our greatest business houses have been utterly ruined, and all our centres of commerce are utterly disorganised. In our position, as you so rightly foresaw, Mister Dawson, we are quite incapable of waging a war against Earth at the present time, and we are, therefore, forced to give up all claims that we have in this matter."

The dark, round eyes bored into Dawson's.

"You will notice, Mister Dawson, that I said 'At the present time.' Your actions have built up the undying hatred of the entire

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Lutherian race, and that hatred will be a long time before it dies. In fact, I would venture a guess that it will not die while the race itself still lives. It may take us ten or even twenty years to recover from the economic disaster which you have so ingeniously engineered, but I would like you to remember that one day we shall recover, Mister Dawson, and our hatred will still be with us when that time comes."

Abruptly the screen went blank.

There was dead silence in the office for several long seconds, and then Dawson's voice was cold and trembling as he whispered, "Johnny Dawson is a dirty, stinking rat who's going to get drunk every night for a month and then hate himself for the rest of his miserable existence." He raised his eyes and looked at Walton who stood mutely beside the desk. "I hope you're satisfied Mister Governor, you and Hendrix both. I hope you're very proud of what I've done on your behalf."

The visiphone buzzed urgently, and the speaker announced, "Priority call from Earth. Two and one half minutes."

The connection was still on and Dawson watched the screen lighten as the beaming feature of Hendrix swam into view.

"Great work, Johnny. I knew you'd fix it. The news just came through but there aren't any details yet."

"Fine. I'm so glad that you're happy." Dawson's voice was ironic.

"Come on, tell me how it happened."

"You mean you haven't figured it out yet?"

"No, I tell you, I just heard."

"Well. I got drunk one night—"

"For Pete's sake—"

"This is my story. Shut up. I got drunk and I met a man who told me a lot I didn't know about copper. He told me, among other things, that it's the base on which Lutherian economy is founded—just as Uranium is the Terran stabiliser. Seems that all the natural deposits in the Lutherian system were exhausted centuries ago, and now they import only as much of the metal as is wanted to maintain the economic status quo, and that under strict licence control. In fact, I understand there is a highly profitable, but illegal, trade in copper rather like that in uranium which exists in the solar system."

"Get to the point," broke in Hendrix.

"I will, and fast. By importing all that copper to Elkan and then handing the Terran part of the planet to the Lutherians we completely nullified their customs and currency restrictions. It

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happened so fast that the nice, kind democratic government of Luther was quite unprepared for the possible repercussions that our apparent good deed might have. They never had a chance to sort out all the implications of the hand-over until it was too late. The bright boys among the crews of the Lutherian ships we hired caught on fast, they knew all too well that the customs laws for other races didn't apply to Elkan any more, because it was now Lutherian territory. The government was hamstrung by its own laws, and no one importing copper from Elkan to Luther could be prosecuted until new laws had been drawn up." Dawson shrugged. "That's about all. Inside a week copper was floating around Luther like—like a cloud belt round Venus. Economically, of course, they're finished for at least a decade. They'll have to rebuild from the bottom up just as Earth did when gold became too plentiful. They are no more capable of starting a war now than they are of locking copper out of their lives."

Hendrix was beaming like a Cheshire cat over a saucer of milk by the time Dawson had ended.

"Great work, Johnny," he purred. "There'll be a bonus and a long vacation when you get back."

"Payment for wrecking a world," commented Dawson bitterly.

"Oh, don't be idotic—"

"Listen, Hendrix." Dawson leaned forward to glare intently at the small screen. "I'm a skunk in any language, and all because I had a job to do—"

"Now, listen—"

"You listen. If you were in this room right now I'd cut out your liver and wear it in my hat. In fact, I may use Walton's for a similar purpose. So just pray I cool off before I get back to Earth.

"And before we get cut off you can pass a message on to the Colonisation Board. I've got them out of a spot this time, but in ten or twenty or thirty years the Lutherians are going to be back where they were a month ago, and they've got long memories. When that happens I'm not going to be around, so tell the Board they've got about twenty years to think of a way out of the damnedest mess they're ever likely to get into. Tell them that I wish them luck—they'll get everything that's coming to them, and I'll be laughing myself sick."

Hendrix astonished face faded from the screen as the connection was broken. Dawson rose from the chair and made for the door where he paused, with his hand on the knob, to turn and look back at Walton standing white faced by his desk.

"As one rat to another," he growled. "So long, governor."

Lan Wright

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Mimicry can often fool the auditory sense but seldom the visual. If an alien invader was in a position to change his atomic structure at will and pose as a human Earth would stand small hopes of identifying the mimic. Given time, however, some kind of test would undoubtedly be set up.

OUTSIDE

By Brian W. Aldiss

They never went out of the house.

The man whose name was Harley used to get up first. Sometimes he would take a stroll through the building in his sleeping suit—the temperature remained always mild, day after day. Then he would rouse Calvin, the handsome, broad man who looked as if he could command a dozen talents and never actually used one. He made as much company as Harley needed.

Dapple, the girl with killing grey eyes and black hair, was a light sleeper. The sound of the two men talking would wake her. She would get up and go to rouse May; together they would go down and prepare a meal. While they were doing that, the other two members of the household, Jagger and Pief would be rousing.

That was how every "day" began: not with the inkling of anything like dawn, but just when they had slept themselves back into wakefulness. They never exerted themselves during the day, but somehow when they climbed back into their beds they slept soundly enough.

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The only excitement of the day occurred when they first opened the store. The store was a small room between the kitchen and the blue room. In the far wall was set a wide shelf, and upon this shelf their existence depended. Here, all their supplies "arrived." They would lock the door of the bare room last thing, and when they returned in the morning their needs—food, linen, a new washing machine—would be awaiting them on the shelf. That was just an accepted feature of their existence: they never questioned it among themselves.

On this morning, Dapple and May were ready with the meal before the four men came down. Dapple even had to go to the foot of the wide stairs and call before Pief appeared. So that the opening of the store had to be postponed till after they had eaten, for although the opening had in no way become a ceremony, the women were nervous of going in alone. It was one of those things.

"I hope I get some tobacco," Harley said as he unlocked the door. "I'm nearly out of it."

They walked in and looked at the shelf. It was all but empty.

"No food," observed May, hands on her aproned waist. "We shall be on short rations today."

It was not the first time this had happened. Once—how long ago now?—they kept little track of time—no food had appeared for three days and the shelf had remained empty. They had accepted the shortage placidly.

"We shall eat you before we starve, May," Pief said, and they laughed briefly to acknowledge the joke, although Pief had cracked it last time too.

Two small packets only lay on the ledge. One was Harley's tobacco, one was a pack of cards. Harley pocketed the one with a grunt and displayed the other, slipping the deck from its package and fanning it.

"Anyone play?" he asked.

"Poker," Jagger said.

"Canasta."

"Gin rummy."

"We'll play later," Calvin said. "It'll pass the time in the evening."

Nothing was in operation to separate them, but there seemed no strong force to keep them together, once the tiny business of opening the store was over. Jagger worked the vacuum cleaner down the hall, past the front door that did not open and rode it up the stairs to clean the upper landings; not that the place was dirty, but cleaning was something you did anyway in the morning.

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The women sat with Pief desultorily discussing how to manage the rationing, but after that they lost contact with each other and drifted away on their own. Calvin and Harley had already strolled off in different directions.

The house was a rambling affair. It had few windows, and such as there were did not open, were unbreakable and admitted no light. Darkness lay everywhere; illumination from an invisible source followed one's entry into a room—the black had to be entered before it faded. Every room was furnished, but with odd pieces that bore little relation to each other, as if there was no purpose for the room. Rooms equipped for purposeless beings have that air about them.

No plan was discernable on first or second floor or in the long, empty attics. Only familiarity could reduce the maze-like quality of room and corridor. At least there was ample time for familiarity.

Harley spent a long while walking about, hands in pockets. At one point he met Dapple; she was drooping gracefully over a sketchbook, amateurishly copying a picture that hung on one of the walls—a picture of the room in which she sat. They exchanged a few words, then Harley moved on.

Something lurked in the edge of his mind like a spider in the corner of its web. He stepped into what they called the piano room and then he realised what was worrying him. Almost furtively, he glanced round as the darkness slipped away, and then looked at the big piano. Some strange things had arrived on the shelf from time to time and had been distributed over the house: one of them stood on top of the piano now.

It was a model, heavy and about two feet high, squat, almost round, with a sharp nose and four buttressed vanes. Harley knew what it was. It was a ground-to-space ship, a model of the burly ferries that lumbered up to the spaceships proper.

That had caused them more unsettlement than when the piano itself had appeared in the store. Keeping his eyes on the model, Harley seated himself at the piano stool and sat tensely, trying to draw *something* from the rear of his mind . . . something connected with space ships.

Whatever it was, it was unpleasant, and it dodged backwards whenever he thought he had laid a mental finger on it. So it always eluded him. If only he could discuss it with someone, it might be teased out of its hiding place. Unpleasant; menacing, yet with a promise entangled in the menace. If he could get at it, meet it boldly face to face, he could do . . . something definite. And until he had faced it, he could not even say what the something definite was he wanted to do.

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A footfall behind him. Without turning, Harley deftly turned up the piano lid and ran a finger along the keys. Only then did he look back carelessly over his shoulder. Calvin stood there, hands in pockets, looking solid and comfortable.

"Saw the light in here," he said easily. "I thought I'd drop in as I was passing."

"I was thinking I would play the piano a while," Harley answered with a smile. The thing was not discussable, even with a near acquaintance like Calvin because . . . because of the nature of the thing . . . because one had to behave like a normal, unworried human being. That at least was sound and clear and gave him comfort: behave like a normal human being.

Reassured, he pulled a gentle tumble of music from the keyboard. He played well. They all played well, Dapple, May, Pief . . . as soon as they had assembled the piano, they had all played well. Was that natural? Harley shot a glance at Calvin. The stocky man leaned against the instrument, back to that disconcerting model, not a care in the world. Nothing showed on his face but an expression of bland amiability.

They gathered for a scanty lunch, the talk was trite and cheerful, and then the afternoon followed on the same pattern as the morning, as all the other mornings; secure, comfortable, aimless. Only to Harley did the pattern seem slightly out of focus; he had a clue to the problem. It was small enough, but in the dead-calm of their days it was large enough.

May had dropped the clue. When she helped herself to jelly, Jagger laughingly accused her of taking more than her fair share. Dapple, who always defended May, said, "She's taken less than you, Jagger."

"No," May corrected, "I think I *have* more than anyone else. I took it for an interior motive."

It was the kind of pun anyone made at times, but Harley carried it away to consider. He paced round one of the silent rooms. Interior, ulterior motives. Did the others here feel the disquiet he felt? Had they a reason for concealing that disquiet? And another question—

Where was 'here'?

He shut that one down sharply.

Deal with one thing at a time. Grope your way gently to the abyss. Categorise your knowledge.

One: Earth was getting slightly the worst of a cold war with Nitity.

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Two: the Nititians possessed the alarming ability of being able to assume the identical appearance of their enemies.

Three: by this means they could permeate human society.

Four: Earth was unable to view the Nititian civilisation from inside.

Inside—a wave of claustrophobia swept over Harley as he realised that these cardinal facts he knew bore no relation to this little world inside. They came, by what means he did not know, from outside, the vast abstraction that none of them had ever seen. He had a mental picture of a starry void in which men and monsters swam or battled, and then swiftly erased it. Such ideas did not conform with the quiet behaviour of his companions; if they never spoke about outside, did they think about it?

Uneasily, Harley moved about the room; the parquet floor echoed the indecision of his footsteps. He had walked into the billiard room. Now he prodded the balls across the green cloth with one finger, preyed on by conflicting intentions. The red spheres touched and rolled apart. That was how the two halves of his mind worked. Irreconcilables: he should stay here and conform; he should—not stay here (remembering no time when he was not here, Harley could frame the second idea no more clearly than that). Another point of pain was that "here" and "not here" seemed to be not two halves of a homogenous whole, but two dissonances.

The ivory slid wearily into a pocket. He decided. He would not sleep in his room tonight.

They came from the various parts of the house to share a bedtime drink.

They talked about the slight nothings that comprised their day, the model of one of the rooms that Calvin was building and May furnishing, the light in the upper corridor that came on too slowly. They were subdued. It was time once more to sleep, and in that sleep who knew what dreams might come? But they *would* sleep. Harley knew—wondering if the others also knew—that with the darkness which descended as they climbed into bed would come an undeniable command to sleep.

He stood tensely just inside his bedroom door, intensely aware of the unorthodoxy of his behaviour. His head hammered painfully and he pressed a cold hand against his temple. He heard the others go one by one to their separate rooms. Pief called goodnight to him; Harley replied. Silence fell.

Now!

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As he stepped nervously into the passage, the light came on. Yes, it was slow—reluctant. His heart pumped. He was committed. He did not know what he was going to do or what was going to happen, but he was committed. The compelling urge to sleep had been avoided. Now he had to hide, and wait.

It is not easy to hide when a light signal follows wherever you go. But by entering a recess which led to a disused room, opening the door slightly and crouching in the doorway, Harley found the faulty landing light dimmed off and left him in the dark.

He was neither happy nor comfortable. His brain seethed in a conflict he hardly understood. He was alarmed to think he had broken the rules and frightened of the creaking darkness about him. But the suspense did not last for long.

The corridor light came back on. Jagger was leaving his bedroom, taking no precaution to be silent. The door swung loudly shut behind him. Harley caught a glimpse of his face before he turned and made for the stairs; he looked non-committal but serene—like a man going off duty. He went downstairs in bouncy, jaunty fashion.

Jagger should have been in bed asleep. A law of nature had been defied.

Unhesitatingly, Harley followed. He had been prepared for something and something had happened, but his flesh crawled with fright. The light-headed notion came to him that he might disintegrate with fear. All the same, he kept doggedly down the stairs, feet noiseless on the heavy carpet.

Jagger had rounded a corner. He was whistling quietly as he went. Harley heard him unlock a door. That would be the store—no other doors were locked. The whistling faded.

The store was open. No sound came from within. Cautiously, Harley peered inside. The far wall had swung open about a central pivot, revealing a passage beyond. For minutes Harley could not move.

Finally, and with a sense of suffocation, he entered the store. Jagger had gone through—there. Harley also went through. Somewhere he did not know, somewhere whose existence he had not guessed. Somewhere that wasn't the house. The passage was short and had two doors, one at the end rather like a cage door (Harley did not recognise a lift when he saw one), one in the side, narrow and with a window.

The window was transparent. Harley looked through it and then fell back choking. Dizziness swept in and shook him by the throat.

Stars shone outside.

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With an effort, he mastered himself and made his way back upstairs; lurching against the bannisters. They had all been living under a ghastly misapprehension . . .

He barged into Calvin's room and the light lit. A faint, sweet smell was in the air, and Calvin lay on his broad back, fast asleep.

"Calvin! Wake up!" Harley shouted.

The sleeper never moved. Harley was suddenly aware of his own loneliness and the eerie feel of the great house about him. Bending over the bed, he shook Calvin violently by the shoulders and slapped his face. Calvin groaned and opened one eye.

"Wake up, man," Harley said, "Something terrible's going on here."

The other propped himself on one elbow, communicated fear rousing him thoroughly.

"Jagger's *left the house,*" Harley told him. "There's a way outside. We're—we've got to find out what we are." His voice rose to an hysterical pitch. He was shaking Calvin again. "We must find out what's wrong here. Either we are victims of some ghastly experiment—or we're all monsters!"

And as he spoke, before his staring eyes, beneath his clutching hands, Calvin began to wrinkle up and fold and blur, his eyes running together and his great torso contracting. Something else—something lively and alive—was forming in his place.

He only stopped yelling when, having plunged downstairs, the sight of the stars through the small window steadied him. He had to get out, wherever "out" was.

He pulled the small door open and stood in fresh night air.

Harley's eyes were not accustomed to judging distances. It took him some while to realise the nature of his surroundings, to realise that mountains stood distantly against the starlit sky, and that he himself stood on a platform twelve feet above the ground. Some distance away, lights gleamed, throwing bright rectangles onto an expanse of tarmac.

There was a steel ladder at the edge of the platform. Biting his lip, Harley approached it and climbed clumsily down. He was shaking violently with cold and fear. When his feet touched solid ground, he began to run. Once he looked back: the house perched on its platform like a frog hunched on top of a rat trap.

He stopped abruptly then, in almost dark. Abhorrence jerked up inside him like retching. The high, crackling stars and the pale serration of the mountains began to spin and he clenched his fists to hold on to consciousness. That house, whatever it was, was

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the embodiment of all the coldness in his mind. Harley said to himself, "Whatever has been done to me, I've been cheated. Someone has robbed me of something so thoroughly I don't even know what it is. It's been a cheat, a cheat . . ." And he choked on the idea of those years that had been pilfered from him. No thought: thought scorched the synapses and ran like acid through the brain. Action only. His leg muscles jerked into movement again.

Buildings loomed about him. He simply ran for the nearest light and burst into the nearest door. Then he pulled up sharp, panting and blinking the harsh illumination out of his pupils.

The walls of the room were covered with graphs and charts. In the centre of the room was a wide desk with vision-screen and loud-speaker on it. It was a business-like room with over-loaded ash-trays and a state of ordered untidiness. A thin man alertly sat at his desk.

Four other men stood in the room, all were armed, none seemed surprised to see him. The man at the desk wore a neat suit; the others were in uniform.

Harley leant on the door jamb and sobbed. He could find no words to say.

"It has taken you three years to get out of there," the thin man said. He had a thin voice.

"Come and look at this," he said, indicating the screen before him. With an effort, Harley complied.

The scene was Calvin's bedroom. The outer wall gaped, and through this two uniformed men were dragging a strange creature, a wiry, mechanical-looking being that had once been called Calvin.

"Calvin was a Nititian," Harley observed dully. He was conscious of a sort of stupid surprise at his own observation.

The thin man nodded approvingly.

"Enemy infiltration constituted quite a threat," he said. "Nowhere on Earth was safe from them: they can kill a man, dispose of him and turn into exact replicas of him. Makes things difficult. We lost a lot of state secrets that way. But Nititian ships have to land here to disembark the Non-Men and to pick them up again after their work is done.

"We interrupted one such ship-load and bagged them singly after they had assumed humanoid form. We subjected them to artificial amnesia and put small groups of them into different environments for study. This is the Army Institute for Investigation of Non-Men, by the way. We've learnt a lot . . . quite enough to combat the menace . . . Your group, of course, was one such—"

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Harley asked in a gritty voice, "Why did you put me in with them?"

The thin man rattled a ruler between his teeth before answering. "Each group has to have a human observer in their very midst, despite all the scanning devices that watch from outside. You see, a Nititian uses a deal of energy maintaining a human form; once in that shape, he is kept in it by self-hypnosis which only breaks down in times of stress, the amount of stress bearable varying from one individual to another. A human on the spot can sense such stresses . . . It's a tiring job for him; we get doubles always to work day on, day off—"

"But I've always been there—"

"Of your group," the thin man cut in, "The human was Jagger, or two men alternating as Jagger. You caught one of them going off duty."

"That doesn't make sense," Harley shouted. "You're trying to say that I—"

He choked on the words. They were no longer pronounceable. He felt his outer form flowing away like sand as from the other side of the desk revolver barrels were levelled at him.

"Your stress level is remarkably high," continued the thin man, turning his gaze away from the spectacle. "But where you fail is where you all fail. Like Earth's insects which imitate vegetables, your cleverness cripples you. You can only be carbon copies. Because Jagger did nothing in the house, all the rest of you instinctively followed suit. You didn't get bored—you didn't even try to make passes at Dapple—as chic a Non-Man as I ever saw. Even the model space ship jerked no appreciable reaction out of you."

Brushing his suit down, he rose before the skeletal being which now cowered in a corner.

"The inhumanity inside will always give you away," he said evenly, "However human you are outside."

Brian W. Aldiss

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Politically and economically the Three Worlds—Earth, Venus and Mars—were ruled by a benificent Government apparently headed by one legendary figure, Hartland Smith. His 'removal' would pave the way for constitutional changes which, the Opposition hoped, would be to their advantage. But how kill a man who was never seen ?

KILL ME THIS MAN

By Francis G. Rayer

Illustrated by HUNTER

The apartment was silent except for a radio on the floor above and Berry Gordon's gaze flicked back to the table to assure he had made no error. The green envelope was still there, half expected; half dreaded, perhaps. It had not been there when he had gone into his bedroom five minutes earlier.

He strode to the balcony and looked down. Three floors below, at street level, a woman had just emerged from the building. She did not look back or up at him—did not, indeed, appear in any way unusual. He waited, but no one else left the building. From his knowledge of the way the people's undercover movement operated he had not expected to discover his caller so easily and he took up the envelope. Its colour mocked. Green, he thought. Red would be better. Red for danger—to him. Undercover messages always came in green, but the danger was there still, both for him and others.

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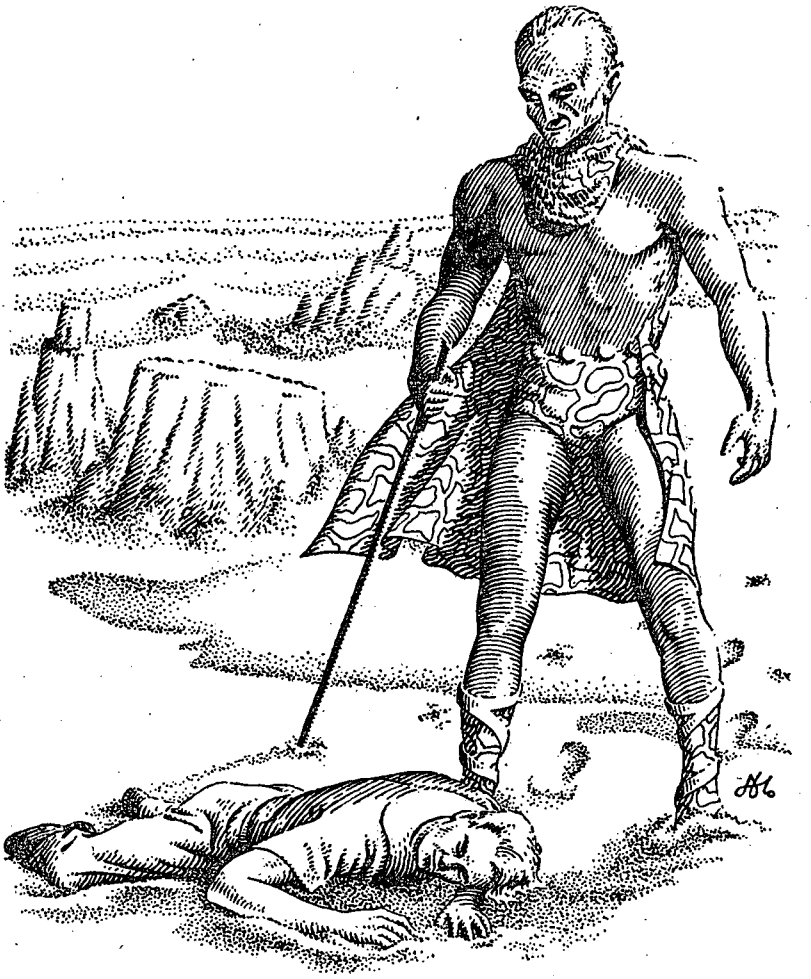

He wondered who the others would be, this time. For months he had sensed something big was in preparation. He had passed tests and training schedules demanding extremities of endurance, not knowing their purpose; had been worked on by hard-faced

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specialists he did not know; had fainted, once, from sheer fatigue. The people's movement did not thus waste their time unless a purpose was to be served.

He slit the envelope. It contained a single sheet signed by the criptogram always found on undercover directives, and one short phrase: *Kill me Hartland Smith.*

He read it twice, burned it, deposited the crushed ash in the chute, and felt the first numbing shock pass. Kill Hartland Smith. Three men had already tried. None had returned.

The door opened, closed. "Is anything wrong, dear . . . ?"

He composed his face. It must not show. "No, Joan." The transparent bag she carried showed she had been shopping. Well-built, twenty-two, dark, clear-eyed, she had the intelligence to reach conclusions for herself.

"You look worried," she said.

Berry smiled. "I may have to go away a few days—on business."

Joan was not in the people's movement, and he was glad. A man did not want his wife mixed up in things that became so deadly earnest and dangerous. Part of his toughening course had taken him away for a month. That had been business, too, he had said. She slipped the things away and came to him.

"Let me be with you this time—"

He shook his head resolutely. "Impossible. There'll be travelling, long board meetings." The lies came easily. Since the green envelope had arrived they were part of his job. "You'd be worn out."

She studied his face, a tiny frown between her clear eyes. He wished he could drop the deception. Instead, he pressed her arm.

"It'll soon be over!"

The outcome, unfortunately, was less certain, he thought as he sat down to the evening meal. To assassinate a dictator, shoot a king, or murder a prime-minister—each would have been easy, compared with the killing of Hartland Smith. Smith was all three, and more. His was a name to conjure with, to quell opposition. The law of three planets was upheld in the name of Hartland Smith. That that law was tyrannical and often unjust helped not at all.

Early next morning Berry rode through the awakening city to a huge cream building that never slept. A centre through which flowed at least half the news of Earth, Mars and Venus, it was twenty levels high. Beamed antennae sending and receiving information across millions of miles of space topped it. From lower

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levels a thousand communication channels carried away the news, facts and features later to be seen on video everywhere over the planet. News-centre of three worlds, it hummed around him as Berry rose to a corridor high near the roof and stepped out through fireproof steel gates. The door at the end of the corridor was marked simply "Sam Miller."

Miller was running with practised rapidity through teletyped folios. He put them aside. His sandy brows rose.

"Berry, this early!"

There was a question in his keen eyes. Berry closed the door. "Sorry, Sam. Our week-end trip is off."

Miller looked disappointed. He shuffled the papers on his desk. "If the reason is personal, don't tell me."

"It is." Berry sat on the corner of the desk and let one long leg swing. At forty, Sam Miller had a mature common-sense which kept him from asking awkward questions. More important, he knew a great deal about many people—including Hartland Smith. Berry looked at the third nail of his own right hand. One of the people's movement specialists had treated it for a full month. Hard as steel, it no longer grew. Shaped like a screwdriver . . . and only a very minor modification to his body, compared with some of the other changes . . .

His gaze settled on Miller's face. "Personal—and important," he said. "Maybe you'll know one day." But not if the result was failure. "Thought I'd tell you." He got up, turned to the door, hesitated as if in response to a sudden thought, and came back. "Incidentally, where is Hartland Smith these days?"

Miller's face had a peculiar expression. He pursed his lips. "So you came to ask about Hartland Smith—" He jerked his head to indicate his incoming line communicators. "Cancelled fishing trips don't make necessary personal calls, Berry. You're too busy a man to come half across the city for that."

Berry let his face show nothing. That was one of the things he had been taught. He could keep it expressionless when subjected to pain beyond the threshold of normal enduring.

"I'm off work to-day," he said evenly. "But about Hartland Smith—"

"News is that he took the last lunar rocket to catch the *Blue-spray II* to Mars, where new governmental H.Q. buildings are to be opened."

Berry did not miss the tone. "You sound doubtful—"

Miller made an expressive gesture, though his face took on the bland vacuity known to a hundred million video viewers. "Why

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should I disbelieve? Or believe, for that matter? I've never seen Hartland Smith. Government reports come in and we use them. Hartland Smith is always news—big news. If a report says he's going to Mars, then that's that, far as we're concerned." He hesitated. "Penchard Lane is going to Mars—I saw him board the lunar ship myself. Where Smith is, Lane is also. So that fits."

"Thanks," Berry murmured. He would be on Hartland Smith's trail before the day was past. "Any other news about him?"

"Plenty," Miller tapped some of the folios. "But not such as would interest you. His big speech on video last night was a hit. Mankind is united, at peace—all that stuff—"

United, at peace, downtrodden, Berry thought. "I missed it," he said.

"The usual stuff." Miller's expression said it was not much to miss. "The usual views of agricultural and industrial projects, instead of his face." He turned over a leaf. "Here's a bit—*Mankind must and shall continue to enjoy its peace. Yet under my continued leadership I look with confidence to even greater prosperity. I am dedicated to you, my people—to you and your happiness—*"

"Thanks," Berry interrupted. Hartland Smith could speak for an hour in that vein without repeating himself.

He turned to go, but Miller rose and came round the desk. For a second strong fingers were on Berry's arm.

"Hartland Smith is dynamite. Only fools play with dynamite, Berry. He is the leader of three planets—self-elected, perhaps, but the leader. Better men than I have gone white-haired trying to interview him. If you had something similar in mind—keep away."

Concern was in his eyes. Berry thought of his directive. *Kill me Hartland Smith.* There was no keeping away. It was Smith, or—Berry Gordon.

"Never was a man with so much power as Hartland Smith," Miller stated.

Dry of mouth, Berry smiled. "If I have any news of him, I'll send it along!"

Miller did not smile at the joke. "Do, I'll use it," he said.

His tone was so deadly serious that the words remained even when Berry left the hum and clatter of the building far behind.

The great interplanetary rocket was visible from the exit lock of the lunar ferry ship, and seemed to overtop in immensity even the Lunar City dome. It was apt that a legendary figure like

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Hartland Smith should travel in her, Berry Gordon thought as he showed his clearance papers and ticket. Penchard Lane, too, was a name known on three worlds. Smith ordered; Lane carried through. Sometimes Lane was seen on video, clipped, brisk, efficient, commanding. Not the type to bear fools—or assassins—easily.

The *Bluespray II* was waiting for Mars to pass out of occultation by Earth, and her leaving time entered as an hour ahead. Berry decided much of that hour could be spent in investigation while other passengers thronged the upper ports that gave a skyscraper view of the moon.

The log list, always kept and radioed to Earth for identification of victims in case of accident, must come first. The clerk seemed bored with travel and his tiny and uncomfortable office.

"Mind if I see if a friend is here?" Berry asked.

"Help yourself." The man pushed the lists over.

"Thanks." Eyes apparently on a different column, Berry noted what he sought. There was no mistake. He put a coin on the papers. "No, suppose he changed his mind."

The coin disappeared. "Shall I let you know if he comes late, sir?"

"Doesn't matter." It seemed safe to risk a question. "Anything notable this trip?" That was indirect—but sufficient lead if the man wished to talk.

Some of the clerk's sleepiness passed. "We have two important passengers . . . *one* very important . . . "

"Yes?"

"Hartland Smith and Penchard Lane." Awe was in the voice.

Berry let surprise and admiration show. "You're lucky to have seen them—"

"I haven't, sir. That is, only Lane. Hartland Smith came aboard earlier, under escort, I was told."

His regret was pathetic. "Too bad," Berry said. "Perhaps you'll see him leave."

Outside the office, he sprinted up the spiral stair provided against lift stoppages. Cabin numbers were listed against names. Smith's cabin was locked. Berry looked both ways, then put a black button to the panel, and a receiver plug in one ear. Instantly footfalls, the whirr of busy machinery, and a thousand other sounds of the ship vibrated with almost intolerable loudness through his head. But there was no sound in the room, not even of breathing. He slid the microphone away and slipped an adjustable periscope slender as a needle through the keyhole, scanning the room in sections. It

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was empty, but three large cases marked "Hartland Smith" stood ready for opening. An inner cabin, it had no port. There was no other door.

Steps sounded. Berry straightened and put the instrument away. A dapper little man rounded the corner and passed him without a glance. Berry consciously let his tension relax. Tension was bad. It wasted energy; worse, those trained to observe would notice it, unless wholly concealed.

The ship's sirens wailed, signal that it was five minutes to lifting time, and he made for his cabin. Flat on his thickly padded and sprung bed, he waited the tell-tail hooter and abrupt upward thrust. When it came he experienced satisfaction—not even Hartland Smith himself could leave the ship until Mars . . .

When acceleration was down to the level of apparent Earth gravity he returned to the corridor, walking without seeming purpose to the cabin upon which his investigations must centre. For the first time he wondered whether its number—13—would prove significant for Smith or himself. The passage was empty and he listened. There was breathing within, and quiet movements. Berry tried the door, quickly yet with complete silence. It opened under his left hand while his right tensed upon a neat oblong object in his pocket. Designed and made by men unknown, that object could be lethal.

A man in neat grey was unpacking the cases. He turned, and eyes of the palest blue settled on Gordon.

"You wished to see Mr. Hartland Smith?" His tone betrayed no surprise.

Berry's index finger released the firing stud, half depressed. Smith would have a valet. That was obvious—now. He eyed the room, showed surprise, looked at the door number, and withdrew.

"I thought I was on the level above—"

Back in the corridor, he strolled to the first corner, rounded it, and with instant rapidity saw that he was unobserved. He bent and put the end of the micro-periscope round the corner at floor level. The valet was looking from the cabin door and seemed about to follow. Berry rose, hastened a few steps, then settled down to his regular gait. Refusing to look back, he entered the stairway to the level above. It was apparent that any useful action would have to be preceded by careful planning.

By counting the doors he reached the cabin which occupied the same relative position as Smith's. A footfall, just audible behind him, suggested it was worth risking that most travellers would be

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watching Earth and Luna slip away behind. The door opened under his touch and showed an empty room. A brown lounge suit was on the bed. The quiet footfall came again and he closed the door. The footfalls passed the door, returned, then ceased. He bent, applying the amplifier stethoscope mike to the floor. After a few moments muted sounds, almost killed by the vibrations transmitted through the fabric of the vessel, showed that the valet had indeed followed him and returned to cabin 13. Outside, Berry walked quickly to the corner. It would not be safe to use the cabin above Smith's until he had established who occupied it and when it might be empty.

Within minutes a tall young man entered the cabin, emerging after some delay in the brown lounge suit. Berry followed him until he reached the observation dock, where at least half the passengers were gathered, then returned quickly. The young man's cabin was locked but opened in moments to an adjustable key which Berry knew was a miracle of craftsmanship. He locked the door on the inside and listened, the microphone flat on the floor. Voices sounded, but so attenuated in overtones that the words were indistinguishable. After a time the door of the cabin below opened and closed, and the voices ceased. Complete silence suggested the room was empty.

Moving swiftly, Berry unpacked a metal box that fitted snugly in one pocket. The Undercover Kit J was one which had solved many a problem. Under the sprung bunk, he took a 1/64th in. hole straight down through the floor, stowed the electric drill away, and inserted the optical system of the micro-periscope. The interior of cabin 13 sprang into view, reduced to thumb-nail size. Simultaneously its door opened and an erect, well-built man of perhaps forty-five entered, moving quickly. He passed from the field of view and Berry decided against turning the periscope. The sound might attract attention. Almost at once the man returned, left the cabin, and closed the door. Berry rose. It was not safe to stay longer. The time was near when the cabin's legitimate occupant was likely to return.

Safely outside, Berry felt that he had done well. It was disappointing that he had seen Penchard Lane, recognised from his video appearances, but he must not expect too much in so short a time. It was a long way to Mars, with no intermediate stops . . .

He mingled with the passengers, outwardly bored but inwardly vividly alive to every face. Superficially, at least, they seemed an ordinary crowd of travellers and business men. He drifted to a port, watching the stars and reflections of the folk behind him.

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Earth was visible, a patchy dot. The moon was eclipsed behind the ship's hull.

"Not much to do when the novelty goes," a voice murmured.

It was the dapper little man who had passed when he was outside Smith's cabin. Berry turned, smiling slightly, but his nerves jangling to awareness of possible danger.

"Been this trip many times?" he asked.

"Often enough." The little man was wiry, probably making up in agility what he lacked in weight. He momentarily held Berry's arm, pointing. "Is that Mars?"

A signal ran to Berry's mind and was halted just in time to prevent the almost involuntary reaction. The little man's middle finger had pressed harder than the others—a people's movement recognition sign. But one he had been warned Hartland Smith's men might know. An undercover movement agent had talked. There were ways of loosening tied tongues, given time.

If the other was disappointed, he did not show it. "I've been on Luna six months," he said. "Anything is better than that."

Berry knew the words could have more than one significance. They could be idle conversation—or the reason why a genuine undercover man would use an obsolete sign. Or, again, a statement made by a man in Hartland Smith's pay to initiate doubt in his mind. Hard-pressed, he might seek the little man's help, chancing the sign was genuine . . .

When he left the other he did not look back to see if he was watched. The time had come for sleep, planning—action.

Berry awoke knowing there was someone else in the room. The light was out, the door shut; there was no movement, now, but breathing, quiet and controlled, at the foot of his bunk to the left, as if a man stood there. The intruder was watching, assuring he was still asleep, Berry guessed. Minutes passed and the sound of breathing became a trifle louder and more rapid, as of a man no longer feeling the need of extreme caution. There was a stealthy footfall, then a second, followed by silence except for the breathing, now nearer.

A catch in the rhythm, sixth-sense, perhaps, galvanised Berry's limbs into the movements he had planned in the silence. Simultaneously, a momentary spot of light and a dull *plop* came from the bedside and something tore into the bunk within an inch of where his heart had lain. The sequence of movements carried him out of the bunk and upon his assassin, whose muscles were strong as wire. The other rolled backwards, straightened like a spring,

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and in swift silence opened the door. Berry jerked his head back, staring . . . but there was no silhouette. The corridor was dark, every bulb extinguished. The door closed.

Almost with the same movement Berry tore it open, head and shoulders at floor level. Three missiles spat by feet higher, where his chest should have been. He snapped back two shots with the weapon gathered from under his pillow as he leapt. The corridor walls rang, then silence came.

He dressed, replaced scattered clothing, and was just in time to open the door to a knock. A man in spaceways uniform looked in.

"Had any trouble here, sir?"

"No." Berry saw the corridor was lit. "Anything happened?"

"Don't know. Corridor lights were fused and someone said he heard shots."

The other withdrew and Berry sat on the foot of his bunk. Apparently Hartland Smith had his own means of avoiding danger; *eliminate suspects before they could act.* Effective—but worrying.

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Half an hour had passed when there was a second knock, loud and official. Berry started, opened the door, and found himself meeting piercing eyes in a face devoid of human emotion.

"Come with me!" The words were a crisp, snapped order.

Two men of miltary bearing stood behind Penchard Lane, hands near belts.

Berry let his face show mild surprise. "I don't understand."

"You don't need to," Lane stated. He stepped aside; the two entered and halted each side of Berry. Lane's gaze swept round the cabin. "Probably a great deal of interest here," he murmured. "We'll see later."

Berry found himself conducted down the corridor, a guard close each side. No passenger was visible anywhere on that level, or in the lift. Their absence was significant. They strode into a cabin together and Lane closed the door.

"Search him."

Expert fingers flashed over Berry's clothing, leaving no conceivable hiding place untouched. Wooden-faced, he stood motionless. As a last safeguard against forced confession there was always the escape into death implanted in a right upper molar. One *hard* bite, and not even Hartland Smith could make him talk.

"I shall make a complaint on landing," Berry said evenly.

They did not reply. Penchard Lane surveyed him across three feet of stillness. Then his gaze flicked to one of the guards.

"Search his cabin and bring anything of interest here."

The man withdrew and Berry waited. There were things in his baggage which no ordinary traveller would have.

"It is reported you caused a disturbance," Lane stated. "That cannot be permitted."

Berry was silent. That was the tale they would tell if anyone enquired. Minutes passed and the guard returned. Item after item was placed upon a narrow table. The J kit. Adjustable keys. Infra-red ray detector. A dozen clever gadgets worth a fortune. Lane turned one over.

"Anything to say, Gordon—if your name *is* Gordon?"

Berry was silent, hoping they would not kill him now. Lane pushed the equipment aside.

"You have planned burglary, sabotage, or assassination. Theft seems a small motive. Sabotage in space might mean self-destruction. So assassination remains. The ship carried our leader, Hartland Smith. Only one party desires his death—the people's underground. Therefore you are their agent, sent to assassinate Hartland Smith." He paused significantly. "Tell me, am I correct?"

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Berry met him eye to eye. "People's underground? What is that?"

Lane sighed. "You do it well. Ability wasted. You know what happened to your companions?"

Berry was silent because there was nothing to say. Refutation of the silent witness of the objects in his baggage was impossible.

Lane shrugged. "You'll talk—later."

Under crisp instruction the guards emptied Berry's pockets, leaving only the clothing in which he stood. He was hustled to the adjoining cabin and locked in. It was empty as a box, devoid of even the usual bunk and fittings. He supposed further action on Lane's part must wait until they reached Mars.

Walls, floor and ceilng were solid metal, the door a perfect fit. The only interruption to their smooth surface was at ceiling height where grilles large as his palm, pre-cast in the metal, formed part of the ship's ventilation system. No hope lay there. Even if he could tear the grilles away the air conduits would scarcely take an arm.

He sat on the floor, waiting. As time passed a captor's vigilance invariably decreased. Furthermore, any effort at escape must come when Mars was near because he could not remain at liberty in the ship. Ship turnover had not yet taken place, and he could judge from that.

No one came. He examined walls and floor minutely and was confident he was unobserved. An ear to the door met only silence, but that was not conclusive.

The warning warble of ship turnover came after he had emerged from light sleep. Five minutes later it came, occupying a minute. Taking advantage of the shifting apparent gravity, he checked both gratings and the ceiling. All were completely soild. Then apparent motion ceased. Apparent gravity returned, settling as the ship reached steady deceleration, beginning the long drop to Mars on her jets. Standing in the middle of the cabin floor he studied the door. It had no keyhole on the inside. But there were other ways—danger kindled ingenuity, and the people's movement lacked experience of neither.

The turn-up of one trouser leg was insulated braded foil cable. He tore it off and ripped it from its fabric. One shoe sole unscrewed with his finger nail, disclosing a cavity hiding a cutting electrode and handle. Stretched to full height, he could just reach the disc of the ceilng lighting fitment. Six screws held it. Removed, a daylight bulb showed. He pulled it out and the white light ceased, forcing him to work by touch. The broken bulb could be

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used as a connector, and the foil cable should reach the door, he thought.

Within minutes the connections were complete and violet light played in the cabin as he struck an arc by the probable site of the door lock. The light changed slowly to green as the molecules of the tool began to disintegrate atomically under the induced heat. The door began to grow red hot, then white, then globules of metal fell. Squinting and perspiring, he watched the electrode creep smaller. Suddenly it was gone. The atomic arc ceased. He hooked the handle in the white hot metal and tugged. The door stuck, then opened. Sparks flashed from tool connector to floor as he dropped it, and the corridor lights went out. Simultaneously, the ship's warning system hooted. Touchdown was due.

He ran by memory, counting. A man on his feet when landing began usually had a score of broken bones . . . The spiral stairway and other corridors were lit and empty. Still counting, he flung himself along the passage to his cabin. There was a good chance it was not locked . . .

The door opened to his pressure and he gained his bunk as the first squeezing shock of the landing jets struck through the ship. Pinned there while moments fled, he saw that the least apparently dangerous items of his personal belongings remained untouched. A hard-covered pocketable volume entitled "Ancient Philosophy" lay where he had put it—and was a sham containing items that could speak with very different voice.

Instantly the last shock passed he was on his feet and running, the book in one hand. The stairs were long, but the lift unusable until released from its shock bumpers. He reached the exit lock just as it began to open, pushed through with a shout from behind ringing in his ears, and saw six feet away and below the rising boom of the descent gantry. He leapt, aware of the concrete a hundred feet below. A workman's service ladder topped the girder boom and within seconds he was out of sight of the ship's exit port, and descending.

Not until he was behind buildings did he cease to run. Men had shouted; two had tried to intercept him. Someone had cried, "Stowaway, catch him!" But there was no chase—at the moment. It would only begin when Penchard Lane descended from the ship, when Berry knew he would become hunted on the face of Mars.

He walked quickly. Away to his left was one of the thousands of huge manufacturing plants which poured atmospheric gases to the sullen sky and he turned that way. Undue haste would only attract attention—and the air of Mars was still rare as a mountain top so that prolonged running was impossible.

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Within twenty minutes he knew that the locality of the landing point was being searched; within the hour the adjacent city was unsafe. Penchard Lane was not giving him time to change his appearance.

When Berry saw police arriving to encircle a building he had just left he decided the city was no refuge. A powerful car stood empty round the next corner and he took it. The road from the city which he chose at random proved as yet unguarded. Soon the stark buildings of man's making disappeared behind. Half an hour later the green belt men had planted ended also and the road became a mere track of consolidated sand. Beyond was the desert—and time to rest, sleep, and disguise himself as best he could.

He drove for two hours, saw his fuel was half gone, and hid the car in a dip behind rocks. A mile away was a rise from which both road and hidng place could be seen. He gained it on foot. Only after several days would it be safe to return to the city, he decided. Darkness was coming now, with an unusually stiff evening wind, and he lay down to sleep in a cleft.

He awoke to the sound of piping gusts and sand stinging his face. The sky was black, the night a howling fury of flying particles. Impossible to fight his way against the wind, or to find the saloon . . . He lay in the cleft, face and eyes masked in his clothing, only struggling up when the sand threatened again and again to bury him.

Hours passed and dawn was in the sky when the wind dropped. Choked and thirsty, he rose and gazed down at the rocks. Only their tops showed above a new plain of sand. Grim faced, he plodded down and went over the area a dozen times. Nothing showed where the vehicle lay. Even if located, he could never free it, he knew. He abandoned the search and stared over the dunes. There was nothing . . . only sand and occasional rock outcroppings. His driving speed had not been great over the poor surface, good as the car had been. Perhaps thirty miles an hour for two hours, he decided. Sixty miles was a long way to go on foot, unequipped. He searched the area for the last time, then began to march.

Hours passed. Sometimes he rested. He wondered what Joan would think if he never came back. Somehow, he had never expected to fail. But probably the others who had tried before him had felt that way too.

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He rested when the sun was highest, dozed, and awoke to find a walnut-skinned Martian soberly studying him. He rose quickly, on the defensive. The Martian was his height, large-chested and immeasurably hardy. But his eyes were sad.

"You will die, earthman," he said.

Berry relaxed. There had been two races on Mars when man came—one simple, strong—yet violent. One wise, hardy, yet kindly. The simple had died or learned to work for men. The wise had just—died . . . Yet that they were not wholly extinct the individual before him proved.

"You are one of the Sapients—one of the Wise Ones," he said.

The Martian inclined his head. "So the first of your kind to come called us. That was in my father's day."

Berry felt elated. "You can give me water—can take me back to our city?"

"Why should I?" It was a simple statement. Why should one of a dying race help an interloper . . . ?

"Because I wish to kill Hartland Smith, who helped destroy you and destroys freedom itself," Berry stated. "It was he who rejected our plan to leave you free to live as you wish—he who wishes to make Earth rich with the wealth of Mars. Many of us do not love him. I was sent to kill him."

"To do murder?"

"No—to avenge the innocent and save others—"

They regarded each other seriously. The compassionate eyes were understanding.

"Tyrants must die?"

"Exactly!" Berry declared. "He abuses his power."

The Martian inclined his head. "I will help you. Come." As they walked side by side he smiled with infinite sadness. "I help because I believe you intend good. We, the wise ones, do not love Earthmen, but Mars is big and our needs small. All could have lived together." Momentary hope illuminated his face. "Is it still-too late? If this man were dead—?"

"Who knows?" Berry murmured.

Later, they rested and ate in a sandstone cave. "My people are simple," the Martian stated. "We do not wish to labour all day to buy things for which we have no use. Many of the things you value are to us worthless. Great buildings constructed without worthwhile purpose mock their makers—"

"Mars will be a better place when Hartland Smith is dead," Berry said.

They slept; went on; ate and slept again. Admiration for the

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Martian and his fellows grew stronger hourly. With it grew increased contempt and hatred for Hartland Smith and all his works. Smith was exploiting Mars, ruining it for future generations of men.

At the fringe of the green belt the Martian stopped. "We shall live hoping it is not too late," he said. "Mars can be kind to men who love her."

Berry watched him go back over the sand. Here alone was reason for Smith to die. Mars, Earth and Venus would rejoice. *And Smith knew it,* he thought.

He entered the city when the streets were dim with evening. His face was browned, his hair made light with chemicals from his kit. The gun it contained, minute but deadly, lay in one hand. The few remaining items were in one pocket.

The government building was a large block containing offices and living accommodation. High officials stated they liked to live near their work so that they might better serve the people. Some believed. Others pointed out the arrangement meant no official need walk the streets unguarded at night . . .

An image-converter screen from his kit showed that infra-red beams guarded the top of the wall surrounding the new building. The wall had one entrance only, guarded by two men. He watched them a moment from the corner, then returned the way he had come. At the back of the building, quite near the wall on its outside, an engineer's gantry stood, its platform still raised. With luck, it should be possible to jump the wall from that platform, Berry decided. He climbed the ladder and found the platform two yards from the wall, and nearly level with its top, above which was the beam he must not interrupt. He leapt and landed heavily on concrete. No warning bell began to clang.

It was now apparent that the new building had no windows in its lower floor. Probably there was only one door, opposite the guarded gate and therefore unapproachable. The lowest windows were fifteen feet above.

One section of the suit with which he had been provided was of knitted plastic cord, and furnished a sixty-foot escape rope within moments. The hook for use with it was in the pocket and his third cast caught the sill above. He climbed up. The room was dark and he decided to risk pushing in the glass. It fell with a tinkle. Inside, he saw that the building was not fully complete. Alarms, if any, would presumably be fitted later.

He began to search the building systematically and with extreme

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caution. Much of it was empty. The broadest corridors and most luxurious carpets all seemed to conduct in one direction, ending in magnificent spring doors. He stepped through. Beyond were two single doors, both lit. He listened. There was the sound of movement behind one, but no voices. The tiny gun in his palm, he stepped through and closed the door at his back.

Penchard Lane sat behind a desk. His head rose; his eyes opened wider; one hand moved . . .

"If you give warning and anyone comes you'll be dead before they enter!" Berry snapped.

Lane's hand halted. Berry stepped sideways until the solid wall was at his back. A bodyguard might shoot through the frosted glass.

"Lift your hands and stand against the wall," he ordered.

Lane hesitated, then rose and did so. "You'll never get out alive," he stated. He chewed his lip, his big frame slightly crouched.

"We'll see," Berry said. "Meanwhile, don't try anything. If I pull this trigger it will be doing millions a service."

A little of the colour went from Lane's face. Berry moved round the desk. As he had expected, two buttons were fitted to be operated by the toe. He could only hope that Lane had been taken too by surprise.

"Where is Hartland Smith?" he snapped.

For the first time a look of contempt, pity, and genuine amusement came to Lane's face. "Others have tried to kill Smith—and failed, inevitably."

Berry felt a shock. There was something in the tone . . . . Triumph. Confidence. He drew in his lips suddenly.

"You are Hartland Smith!"

Lane laughed. The triumph and confidence were stronger. "No."

It was a simple statement of fact. Berry felt his own hope of victory crumbling. Smith did not appear on video; had not been seen in the *Bluespray II*. Was a legend, a power always in the background . . .

"You've guessed it," Penchard Lane stated. "There is no Smith. There never was. Therefore you cannot kill him." He laughed. "Do you think a government would let its power rest on such a fragile thing as the life of an individual? I and forty others work in the name of Hartland Smith. You cannot kill us all!"

Abruptly Berry saw it all. A contrived legend indeed! Hartland Smith. A ruthless dictator, a despot, a name to fear—but only a

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name! It was fiendish, clever. In one stroke it rendered useless all his efforts, Berry saw.

"I—I didn't know," he breathed.

"The secret is well kept. The advantage of having a leader no one can slay is obvious—"

With the words Lane sprang with all the strength of his tensed muscles. Berry saw, half too late, and his finger worked once, twice. Startled surprise overspread Lane's face. Momentum carried him to his desk. He lay there twisted on his back, face upwards, dead.

I and forty others, he had said. Berry gnawed his lower lip. This was something the undercover movement had never suspected, so carefully had the legend of Hartland Smith been built up and maintaned.

The second office was empty, but luxuriously fitted. It would undoubtedly be "Hartland Smith's." It would be mere bad luck that if anyone called of sufficient importance to be admitted Smith would be busy elsewhere . . .

Within thirty minutes Berry was out of the building and away. Eight days later, as Herbert Burke, he stepped from the Lunar shuttle to Earth. In under an hour he was in Sam Miller's office. He stood by the window, looking down for a moment at the scene twenty levels below.

"Hartland Smith and Penchard Lane are dead," he stated.

Miller's sandy brows twitched and intense interest lit his keen eyes. "Yes—"

"Both were shot eight days ago at the new H.Q. building on Mars."

Miller rose and stood by Berry. "You testify to that?"

"I do—personally."

Berry felt Miller's grip momentarily on his arm. There was a quick, light pressure of the second finger only—the sign, genuine and unmistakable.

"I didn't know—" he began.

Miller silenced him with a gesture. "I must hurry. I'll have such a story nothing short of the personal appearance of Smith and Lane themselves will refute it." He strode to the desk and sat down. "I suggest you hide for the moment, until Smith's regime is totally overthrown. That should not take long—now."

Berry paused, going out. "One thing—you might add that Smith's men are likely to try to conceal their leader's death by hiding the body . . ."

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He descended to the street. The creators of Hartland Smith had overlooked one vital fact—*a myth built by words and lies could be destroyed by words and lies.* There could be no personal refutation by Smith or Penchard Lane.

He let himself into his rooms quietly, wondering how he should break the news to Joan. She would not like leaving. It would be as well that they be on the move by the time the news first came over radio and video.

She was packed and ready; had obviously been hurrying. To his astonishment a green envelope lay opened on the table. *"All successful. Both pack and leave. S.M."*

"So you killed Smith, Berry," she murmured.

He held her a moment, thinking of that other green envelope. *Kill me Hartland Smith.*

"You are—?" he said. How else explain her readiness?

"Of course, dear."

They left at once.

Francis G. Rayer

THE LITERARY LINE-UP

There is a particularly fine new novelette by C. M. Kornbluth coming next month dealing with a poor but honest mental mathematical wizard who turns the Atomic Energy Commission upside down. "Gomez" is a powerful story and one that all classes of our readership will enjoy. Short stories are compiled by three of London's professional writers, close drinking friends on Thursday evenings at the "Globe" tavern—E. C. Tubb with "School For Beginners," Ken Bulmer with "The Black Spot," and Sydney Bounds with "Survivor," each story worthy of attention.

Plus the final cataclysmic ending to Charles Dye's serial "Prisoner In The Skull."

Story ratings for No. 28 were :

1.	Wild Talent (Part Three)	Wilson Tucker
2.	Portrait Of A Spaceman	Sydney J. Bounds
3.	Homecoming	E. C. Tubb
4.	Dominoes	C. M. Kornbluth
5.	Regulations	Richard Varne
	Occupation	Edward W. Ludwig

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It is always a pleasure to welcome a new author to our pages and Mr. Neal's story which follows is one that has plenty of ingenuity in its solution. Set a penal colony up complete with scientific safeguards to prevent escape and then find an escape route. Only a scientist would be capable of finding such a solution.

SHORT CIRCUIT

By Gavin Neal

Illustrated by QUINN

Fred Lancing looked at the five determined faces before him and felt the heightened throb of his pulse and a quick stab of excitement that, through long practise, was instantly controlled. These then were the Brotherhood: these the men who, even in this hell of a penal settlement, still maintained the traditions of freedom and liberty which were ruthlessly stamped out in the Solar System. Neither deportation nor the unhealthy Labartian climate had prevented them from fighting on.

The grapevine, which had sprouted in this prison as in every others since the beginning of time, had made him aware that these five men existed, but even it had not been able to tell who they were. That was a secret that the five had kept, for the Party had spies everywhere. Even the human animals on planets like Labartus, far from the Solar System, must be watched and prevented from speaking freely. The grip of the Party must be tight everywhere.

Lancing dropped his eyes to his work. He knew better than do anything that might give the guards an idea that they were talking. That was strictly forbidden and punished with the utmost severity. But in his mind's eye he scanned their faces again, these faces that had no names to identify them, only numbers.

Why had they revealed themselves to him? He was a comparative newcomer there. It was little more than a year since he had arrived at this hell on earth—hell on planet, anyway. They

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could hardly begin to trust him yet and still they had placed their lives in his hands. For what reason had they done it?

Without appearing to move his lips, 29 began speaking. Under these circumstances he had to speak slowly, but there was urgency in his voice. There were still six hours left before they stopped for food but they could not be sure that they would not be interrupted.

"We've had to wait weeks to be put on a job with you. It may be months before you find yourself working with even one of us alone again. We've got to give you all the facts now so that you can work on the problem till then."

Lancing said nothing. His underground work on Earth and Mars had taught him to remain silent until it was absolutely necessary to speak. You never took any chances with the Party against you. It was too efficient.

Having marshalled his facts, 29 resumed.

"You were probably in the Underground so I don't have to tell you what the Party stands for or the power it's got to enforce its vile system. You'll understand why we want to keep on fighting even here for the things that we believe in and what the Party has stamped out. You'll realise that we've kept our numbers small so that we only have to trust a few people we can believe in implicitly."

He glanced briefly at Lancing.

"I can guess what you're thinking. Why trust you? Well, the answer is that we must because we need your help."

Lancing let that sink in but before he had time to come to any conclusions as to what form of help they could want, 56 took up the conversation. Lancing put him down as an ex-professor and guessed that he was probably the brains of the group.

"We are taking what comfort we can from our situation here. It has long been our dream to set up a free and democratic colony somewhere in the galaxy. To make this dream come true, we require a ship fitted with interstellar drive. In the Solar System all stellar terminals are guarded with an interlocking system which is almost impregnable. Here there are no such defences. There is no-one on the planet but the guards, the engineers and ourselves, the prisoners. Who is there to guard against since the prison defences are secure?"

A hiss from 41 brought silence. Out of the corner of his eye, Lancing saw the green and gold uniform of the guard in the distance. He noted the swagger and the small flashes of light as the metal tip of the carelessly swung whip caught the sunlight. His eye took in the plastic butt of the inevitable gun sticking from the holster. Then he was giving his whole attention to the excavator

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watching the dark blue clods being torn from the unfamiliar earth. At this stage in his career, it would not do to spoil everything by having the guard pick on him for negligence at work.

Once again his long years of resistance training came to the fore. He had long since acquired the ability to seem immersed in his

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work and yet have his brain free to work on any problem that required attention. He thought briefly of those long years underground, fighting stealthily and quietly against the overwhelming power of the Party; fighting for the centuries-old ideals of toleration and freedom that the hated Party had suppressed. He remembered those who had died in the fight and those, like himself, who had been taken alive and, after a trial that was a travesty of justice, had been sent to one or other of the penal settlements scattered around the boundaries of the explored part of the galaxy.

The guard was strolling in their direction. Was it possible that he suspected that something was going on? Lancing shook off the fear that gripped at his heart, and forced his mind back to rational thinking. It was much more likely that he was coming to separate them. The Party knew what it was doing. It might be inefficient to keep changing around the men from job to job (the men, he thought bitterly! The numbers! Identity, self-respect, everything was lost when you entered a settlement. You became an animal with a number). But it kept them from forming alliances. And slave labour was easy to get and cheap. There was no need of efficiency.

Every tyranny had had its slave labour that had wrought miracles on the faces of the planets. Who would voluntarily have sweated to make the Pyramids? Who had turned the Siberian wastes into a land flowing with milk and honey? Who were forced to make the newly discovered planets fit for human habitation? His spirit would stand for eight, ten years the killing work, and the shrivelling climate before it broke and he at last found peace. Unless . . . unless the Brotherhood could possibly find a way out. The guard was close now and the six were making the excavator work at its maximum. God of freedom, thought Lancing, let me not be separated now. I must hear the rest. He heard the guard stop and listened to the whip whistling gently through the air. He could almost feel the eyes resting on him.

The voice was harsh and insolent, standardised and without feeling like the voices of all the guards. He wondered idly if they took a speech course.

"You are too many on this machine. It is a waste to have six where five can do the work. An extra unit is required on the plastic laying machine. One unit from here will go."

Lancing wondered if his wild heart beats could be heard by the guard. He felt like screaming out his number, 195, to get it over and done with.

"One hundred . . . and twenty three" said the harsh voice. The

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lever in Lancing's hand jerked slightly and a shower of blue earth pattered over his boots. The whip cracked out and he felt the sting of the metal across his bare back. He gritted his teeth and watched the whip snake over to the other side of the excavator and set 123 on his way. "Plastic Layer, at the double!"

The receding of the guard produced no hatred. He had long since ceased to hate individuals, and the pain in his back was chalked up against the Party not against a body with arms and legs. And there was hope in his heart now at the thought of a free colony somewhere in the galaxy. A colony with no Party, it was almost inconceivable. But how could they ever set one up? It was impossible to get away.

His eyes roamed over the bleak countryside before they dropped to the throbbing machine. The living quarters—the existing quarters—for the prisoners were in the distance. Between these hovels and the excavator was rising the skeleton of a new world. The capital city of the planet would stand here in future years, and in other settlements dotted over the surface other once-human animals were preparing the hydroponic farms, the factories, all the adjuncts of civilised life.

The boundaries of the penal settlement were marked out on the bare blue surface of the planet by lines of high white plastic poles at five yard intervals; no walls, no grills, no doors. Lines of poetry learned sometime in the distant past flowed through Lancing's mind.

"Stone walls do not a prison make
Nor iron bars a cage."

Not in this scientific age, thought Lancing grimly. Walls could be scaled. Bars could be sawn through. Guards would have to be always on the alert. The Party never believed in having to rely on human infalliblity, so the walls were unscalable. Criss-crossing from one pole to the next, forming a network so fine a mouse couldn't have got through, were hundreds of beams of invisible electromagnetic radiation. The blocking of one beam anywhere along the perimeter automatically switched on the heat rays that would blast to dust anything outside the boundary in a strip twenty yards wide. One poor crazed fool had tried it. Lancing shuddered at the memory.

There was only one way out of the compound, through the long corridor that led to the guards' quarters and the temporary space port. And that was guarded continuously both by men and by force fields, with check barriers all along its length. It was futile to even dream of escaping.

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The tapping code sounded on the metal of the excavator above the noise of its working. Lancing took a brief glance at the compound within his range of vision and tapped his all-clear in reply. The other three followed suit. The conversation could now be resumed.

It was 56 who took up his story.

"Let us proceed. If we can escape from here and seize a ship, we could travel as far as possible to the other side of the galaxy and search for a suitable base. There we must attempt to set up, as quickly as possible, a civilisation that could withstand onslaught from the Party. It would take them hundreds, possibly thousands, of years to search every star for our planet. But when they come we must be ready."

Lancing broke in, "But to set up a community like that one would need women. We are all men."

"We are prepared for that. In escaping, we must try to take with us some of the female prisoners who bring food from the hydroponic settlement. This would restrict our time of escape. If this is not possible, we must try to raid a settlement on this or another planet."

He made it sound the most natural thing in the world.

"And the space ship," said Lancing, "Can anyone pilot it?"

"It was for this purpose that 123 was brought in. He is a qualified pilot. His knowledge may be a little out of date after his years of imprisonment but that we must risk."

"I still don't see my part in all this. Nor why you take me in on such short acquaintance."

"The reasons for your admission are twofold." 56 was still working impassively and speaking in the monotonous tones inseparable for this secret talking. "As to the second part, we are becoming desperate. Some of us have been here for years and cannot last much longer. The next ship is due in about six months. We cannot afford to wait perhaps two years for the next. You, we believe, are a scientist who specialised in nuclear engineering. We will require a scientist in our community with your capabilities, but more urgently we require the help of a top grade scientist now. We still have not found a method of escape and we have come to the conclusion that the problem is one which we are not equipped to solve."

Lancing's heart sank. The burden of responsibility was on his shoulders. The whole future of humanity might depend on him, and as the seconds ticked by he felt more and more inadequate for the task. Even when free, he would have felt doubtful of his

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success. After a year of this bestial existence, he was not even sure how much mind he had left.

Having allowed time for his words to sink home, 56 resumed.

"You know the defences of this place. Each post emits beams of radiation and any attempt to get through . . ." He left the sentence unfinished. The memory of the recent attempt was too fresh in their minds.

"The cables to the posts run underground outside the fence. The final power cable enters the prison to hook on to the nuclear generator, but any attempt to sabotage either cable or generator automatically switches the defences over to the stand-by reactor in the guards' 'palace.' And they never let us service that one."

He paused for a few moments. "Is there any way out? We can't see it. We have turned the problem over for years and it still looks blankly back at us. You, as a scientist might see some loophole we have overlooked. You know what goes on inside those posts and cables and reactors. You may see some way of breaking in and stopping the sequence. We are now in your hands in more ways than one."

Lancing could never remember what he replied at that time. He certainly had no ideas and presumably told them so. His mind was in a whirl and he spent the rest of the working hours sorting out the ideas that had been shot at him in that dead-pan conversation.

For the next few months he beat his head against the problem till he was afraid that his brains must burst out. His whole attention was focussed on the single idea of escape and his back was imprinted with a few weals with which the guards had drawn attention in the first days to his carelessness when his mind had been elsewhere.

The day the ship arrived his thoughts clicked into place. Perhaps the sight of the sleek body falling from the sky with rockets blasting forced the barriers in his mind to open, and the solution to flood through. But then he was sweating again, worrying in case the ship left early, in case he never got the opportunity to put the plan into effect, in case . . . He forced the thoughts from his mind. It had to work.

Lancing spent that day in going over the plan, working out every detail and seeking alternatives if things went wrong. At night his tired brain kept working on all the many possibilities of failure and he awoke at intervals sweating from the resulting nightmares.

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He found 82 in his working party next day and seized a few brief moments when they were side by side to whisper quick instructions. There was no time for explanations now; they must trust him implicitly. At the end of the day by dint of careful sidling and positioning he managed to get near enough 123 in the food queue to pass the message on to him. This was accomplished by tapping in morse in short bursts on 123's body whenever an arm or leg was near enough. Lancing could only hope that the message was passed on.

The next day was completely wasted except that Lancing got near enough 56 to find that he had already received the instructions. The first part of the plan needed one of the six to be in a position to sabotage the generator. Lancing had explained where earth must be poured to produce the amount of damage he required, and each of them, he hoped, had now like himself a shoeful or pocketful of earth available. But none of them were detailed for the power house. Lancing started sweating again.

On the way to his detail next morning, he saw 41 give an almost imperceptible nod and knew that one of the others had been in luck. It was almost mid-day when he saw the green and gold uniform head his way and knew that the breakdown had occurred. He had counted on his being called to the job. He was the only suitably qualified prisoner and the engineer officer would be unlikely to want to stay to supervise any of the others when there was a space crew at hand with news of the rest of the galaxy. Prison officers were paid well for their turns on lonely planets, but most of them were thirsting to get back to more civilised spots and news from the Solar System was always precious.

As he walked behind the guard, Lancing went over in his mind once again the details of the next phase of the operation, seeking for difficulties he had overlooked. He could find none that he had not already bargained for and planned against. In the room housing the generating plant, he found an angry engineer officer, as expected, impatient to be back in the guard quarters in the company of the ship's crew. He gave Lancing his orders quickly, fidgeted while the prisoner inspected the damage, curtly gave the guard instructions to allow Lancing the use of the workshop, and was off.

Lancing was well satisfied. The damage was a little more extensive than he had anticipated, and he would have to work faster than he had planned for. But the main results of his plan had been achieved. The damage had been sufficient to require a few parts to be remade in the workshop, and he would be able to work and repair under the uncritical eye of an unqualified guard.

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The guard was more lax than he had expected. For the first time he gave thanks that the defences were so efficient. The guards had been lulled into a false sense of security and now believed their only necessary duty was to keep the prisoners hard at work by the power of their whips. This particular guard settled into a chair near the door of the workshop and devoured a strip magazine that had presumably come in on the ship. His laying of the pistol by his hand was merely a conventional gesture of authority.

Lancing worked fast. In between the remaking of the damaged parts, he managed to construct or to filch from stock all the components necessary for two small but accurate clockwork time switches. He had had occasion to use time fuses every now and again on Earth and he had not forgotten the tiny but efficient mechanism that had ben devised for the purpose by an Underground member who was also a watchmaker. By the time the labour period ended on the second day, the two switches were stored carefully out of sight beneath the generator which was almost back in working order. The engineer officer had occasionally looked in on him and the guard had sometimes shown signs of life, but for the most part he had been left in peace.

The next morning he stood looking at the completed generator, forcing himself to remain calm while he waited for the engineer officer to arrive and inspect his work. He hoped that the final instructions which he had, with some risk, passed on in the last two evenings, had reached all the members of the Brotherhood and that all would be prepared when the moment came.

The inspection was cursory but Lancing's nerves were jumping lest the almost imperceptible ticking from the switches would sound to the officer or guard as thunderous as it did to him. But all went smoothly and, as he crossed the compound, rubbing his head to show the five watching pairs of eyes that all was well, he knew that any faint sound from the clockwork in his pocket would be drowned by the noise of the prisoners at work.

He had had to allow an hour in case he was delayed in his return to the compound and in order to make zero hour roughly at the time when the women who brought the food would be going back with their guard to the hydroponic farm. It was an hour on the rack, an hour of excruciating torture, when his mind could only think of the penalties for failure. And the more he thought about it the more certain failure seemed. He was relying on the accuracy and split second synchronisation of his two pieces of clockwork.

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He knew the precision with which grating controlled machines were able to turn out components but even the best of things were subject to error. And as for the parts he had made himself! The nightmare of his thoughts grew minute by minute more intolerable.

The clicking of the switch swept the ghoulish thoughts from Lancing's mind. The hour was at hand and he must be alert and ready for action. He walked slowly and without panic towards the boundary fence. One of his companions on the silicon compressor gave him a startled glance as he walked past but he paid no attention. His whole energy was concentrated on the task of preventing himself from running.

The shout from behind him almost made him panic. He was still some yards from the fence and the desire to run for it was almost unbearable but he forced himself to turn. The guard was some distance away but he was running in Lancing's direction and the whip in his hand was swinging viciously through the air. Lancing cursed his luck. Conditons had made the guards so complacent, that they normally contented themselves with periodic tours of inspection, spending the rest of the time talking or gambling in or around the huts. The irregular timing of these tours and their ability to observe from the shelter of the buildings when they pleased without being seen, coupled with the savage punishments meted out for any slight deviation from the rules, had been sufficient to keep the prisoners on their toes. That they should choose this moment for an inspection was sheer bad luck.

A quick glance round showed Lancing that there was only one other guard in sight. He had laid plans against such an emergency and he must carry them through and trust that the long-standing docility of the prisoners would prevent the guard from having any suspicion of his true intentions. He beckoned to the guard, shouted something incoherent, and pointed excitedly at the ground beside the nearest post. At the same time he moved sideways so that the compressor hid them from the view of the other guard.

The first guard came to a halt beside Lancing, puffing after the unusual exertion, and bent to examine the ground at which he was pointing. Lancing's left hand fastened round his throat and the right hand closed over the wrist that held the whip. After a few swift movements, learned years before but still rememberd, he allowed the lifeless body to crumple to the ground.

As he straightened himself with the raygun in his hand, he became aware of the white and startled faces watching him from

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the compressor. He had no time to bother about their reactions, time was too precious. With one bound he was clear of the machine's protection, his eyes searching for the guard. He saw the hated uniform begin to crumple under the blast of the gun when the gauntleted hand was still only halfway to the holster. He could only hope that no other guard was looking from some vantage point in that direction.

Pulling the makeshift clock from his pocket, he raced for the fence. He came to a halt beside a post and gave a gasp of relief when he noticed that there were still fifteen seconds left. A quick glance showed him that the other five were also in positon and he raised his hand above his head. Ten seconds to go now before the mechanism in the power house came into action and short circuited the electrical output from the generator. Ten seconds before the

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posts went dead and allowed them to race through to freedom. Too little time left for his mind to consider the possibilities if the time-clocks were not properly synchronised.

Five, four, three, two, one, zero! He dragged his hand down to his side and leapt through the fence, his flesh crawling as it braced itself for the impact of the searing rays. But none came. It had worked! Oh God, it had worked! And he was racing away from the fence towards the space port and freedom.

As they saw six men leap through the fence and live, a startled disbelieving gasp broke from the prisoners and they stood stock still, rooted to the spot by the miracle that they had witnessed. Then some of them threw down their tools and ran for the barrier also. The first man to get there was another member of the team from the compressor and he hurled himself between the posts recklessly. Lancing was well clear when he heard the sizzling of the heat rays on the ground and he did not look back. Time was the ruling factor now.

The other prisoners halted when they saw that the barrier was still as effective as ever and milled around the edge of the compound noisily arguing about what had happened. The guards brought from the huts by the noise of the heat rays raced among them with whirling whips and it was not until Lancing used his pistol for the second time that the fact that an escape had been made was observed. Even then it took a long time to register on minds conditioned to believe that the prison was impregnable, and the Brotherhood had reached the spaceport before the fact was reported to the prison headquarters. At every stage in the chain of communication valuable minutes were gained because the information was so unbelievable.

With the second burst fired at long range, Lancing had killed the guard who was escorting the women back to the farm. That part also had gone according to schedule. The women stood looking in horror and amazement at the crumpled bundle at their feet, but at length, impelled by Lancing's frantic gestures, they too made for the shining space ship.

Lancing and 56 reached the open airlock of the space ship at the same time. Motioning 56 to stand back, Lancing leapt as lightly as he could into the interior, his gun at the ready. He could see the open door of the control room at the end of a short passage, and he ran along towards it on his toes. Inside two engineers were servicing equipment. They turned as he entered and Lancing shot them down without mercy. They were probably unarmed but it would have taken too long to find out.

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His shout brought the rest streaming in from outside. 123 tore past him to the control panel and the other men, at Lancing's orders, proceeded to search the rest of the ship while Lancing stood by with the pistol ready to deal with anyone who was found. The women huddled in the corridor in a dazed, frightened bunch, unable as yet to take in what was happening.

Lancing swung round with an oath at a sound from the lock but it was only the door sliding shut as 123 got the ship ready for instant departure. Before his view of the planet was completely shut off, Lancing saw something that made him yell to the pilot to start up the motors. A mobile heat-blaster had swung out from the guard's block and was heading for the space port. There was no time to lose.

The shouts of "All Clear" from the other members of the Brotherhood were muffled by the whine of the gyros and the roar of the motors starting up. Lancing could feel the sweat trickling down his face and he waited with every dragging second for the sickening sound that would mean that the heat ray was eating its way through the hull.

The lurch of the ship threw him to the floor and for a horrible instant he thought the blaster had struck them. Then the pain in his back and chest and the frantic efforts needed to draw breath into his starving lungs told him that they were accelerating madly, careering at panic speed away from the hateful planet. Even the racking torture of breathing seemed good when the realisation that they were free flooded through his brain.

The reckless acceleration continued until they were well out of reach of the biggest blaster that had ever been invented. Only then did 123 throttle back the motor and climb to escape velocity with a comfortable thrust. Lancing was able to turn his head and see how the others were faring. The four men grinned weakly at him, their eyes shining with their new found freedom. 41 was bleeding from a cut in the head but seemed unconcerned. Two of the women appeared to have been knocked out in the sudden take-off, but the others were getting over their fright and were beginning to realise what had happened. They could hardly dare to believe their good fortune.

When the acceleration stopped, Lancing's braced muscles sent him shooting to the ceiling. He took the shock of the landing with his arms and steered himself on the rebound to glide through the door of the control room. 123 with a sweat-streaked face grinned at him from the pilot's seat. With a good deal of floundering Lancing reached the control panel and hauled himself into

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the navigator's chair. From this vantage point he watched the efforts of the others to get across the cabin. Now that they were free, the tension had broken and they laughed uproariously at each other's efforts to get used to the gravity-free conditions. The two unconscious women were brought in and revived and they all settled down in the control room to see what the next move should be.

"Hell's bells!" said 123 suddenly. "I've just realised I'm not a number any more. I'm a man, a free man, and I've got a name." He savoured it. "Drew Meredith.' 'Folks, meet Drew Meredith.'"

They all exchanged names then, names that had almost been forgotten by some of them. Then Atkinson, formerly 56, became serious.

"I think, ladies and gentlemen, that we should get down to business. I cannot feel that we are completely safe until we have used the interstellar drive to get far out into the unexplored parts of the galaxy. Our next job must be to decide in which direction we mean to head and calculate the details for getting there.

"But first we owe thanks to Lancing for getting us out and then to Meredith for an exceptional take off." He rubbed a bump on his head ruefully and the others laughed. "And I for one should like to know how to perform the miracle of stopping heat rays."

It was Lancing's turn to grin. "Does a successful conjurer give away his secrets?" he said. "Well, perhaps for once I'll break the rules. As you probably gathered, I shorted the output of the generator with a time switch, thereby putting the barrier out of action. I know what you're going to say," he added, as a murmur arose. "That the stand-by reactor immediately comes into operation. The operative word is immediately. Actually, it takes a reactor, starting cold, exactly two seconds to get going. If you can time the exact second the generator will fail with an identical time switch, and can position yourself up against the barrier in readiness, you've got two seconds to get through between the posts. By the time the network is back again you're through and you can cover the next twenty yards without being blasted by heat rays. Q.E.D."

There was a moment's silence and then Meredith spoke slowly.

"Do you mean to tell me that without any knowing it, only two seconds lay between me and eternity?"

Lancing chuckled again.

"What the mind doesn't know, the heart doesn't grieve over." He grabbed a star map. "Any suggestions as to where we look for Home, Sweet Home."

Gavin Neal

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Conrad's bewildering search for the telepath Latimer continues to leave a trail of death in its wake—whichever way he turns he is hemmed in by the frustrating mystery of his own earlier identity. If he could solve that problem most of the jigsaw would fit into space, but the key piece is still missing.

PRISONER IN THE SKULL

By Charles Dye

Illustrated by QUINN

Part Two of Three Parts

FOREWORD

Recovering consciousness, apparently caused by an accident while hunting, the man involved cannot remember anything concerning his former life—he is, in fact, suffering from complete amnesia. A card in his wallet informs him that he is Alister Conrad, President of Sleep-Tanks, Inc., of New Jersey, that he has an apartment in Manhattan and that his wife Laura should be notified in cases of emergency. None of these items register as being familiar. He decides to call his home number but when the TV screen lights up a girl screams and the line goes dead.

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Hungry, tired and mentally sick he is picked up by an obnoxious character named Hypo Ned who promises to get him home but before they get far a heliojet car drops out of the sky and Conrad is taken to police headquarters. There he learns that he had gone on a hunting trip one month before and had been reported missing by his wife, who had also reported his sudden reappearance—it being thought that he was an imposter. Conrad is given treatment by a police doctor but his memory fails to return. He awaits the arrival of his wife but inexplicably she fails to call for him. The police fly him home.

Inside his apartment nothing is familiar—not even his own photograph, but he does learn that sleep-tanks were for people wishing to undergo suspended animation and that the World Council had closed the project six months earlier. Exhaustive enquiries fail to find his wife who has completely disappeared and the mystery deepens when he is sent for by Unesco Headquarters, the advisory organisation of the World Council. Indirectly he is subjected to a hypnotic influence by Dr. Val von Rachin the beautiful Directress of World Education, who informs him that somewhere in the world is a dangerous telepath named Rene de Lamiter who had probably 'gone into the future' by way of a sleep-tank, that Conrad must find and destroy him before he awakes and upsets world ecology.

Conrad engages a private detective named Kyle to find his wife and then goes by heliojet to New Jersey to visit Sleep-Tanks, Inc., where he thinks he might find a clue to de-Lamiter's-hiding-place. Upon his arrival he finds the great sprawling buildings silent and empty and Jameson the caretaker missing. In his office he tries to open the retina-operated wall safe but is knocked senseless by a stun-gun. Upon recovering consciousness he discovers that the retina identification card of de Lamiter given him by von Rachin has been stolen. His muddled thoughts are broken by a TV call from a good-looking brunette named April Jordan—evidently a link with his missing past—who invites him to pick her up at the apartment of a man named Drake, in Manhattan.

Arriving at the Drake mansion Conrad is admitted by a man he presumes is the owner and promptly knocked out. He recovers in a side room to discover a party is in progress and eventually finds April. Because of his amnesia they quarrel and he sees her to her apartment. Upon arriving at his own home he finds that his eye-pattern will no longer open the lock; while awaiting a locksmith he goes downtown where he again meets Hypo Ned who tells him he can fix retina patterns, that, in fact, he had adjusted Conrad's retina pattern before he lost his memory. Paralyzed by an injection forcibly given him by Ned, Conrad is bundled into a heliojet and returned home.

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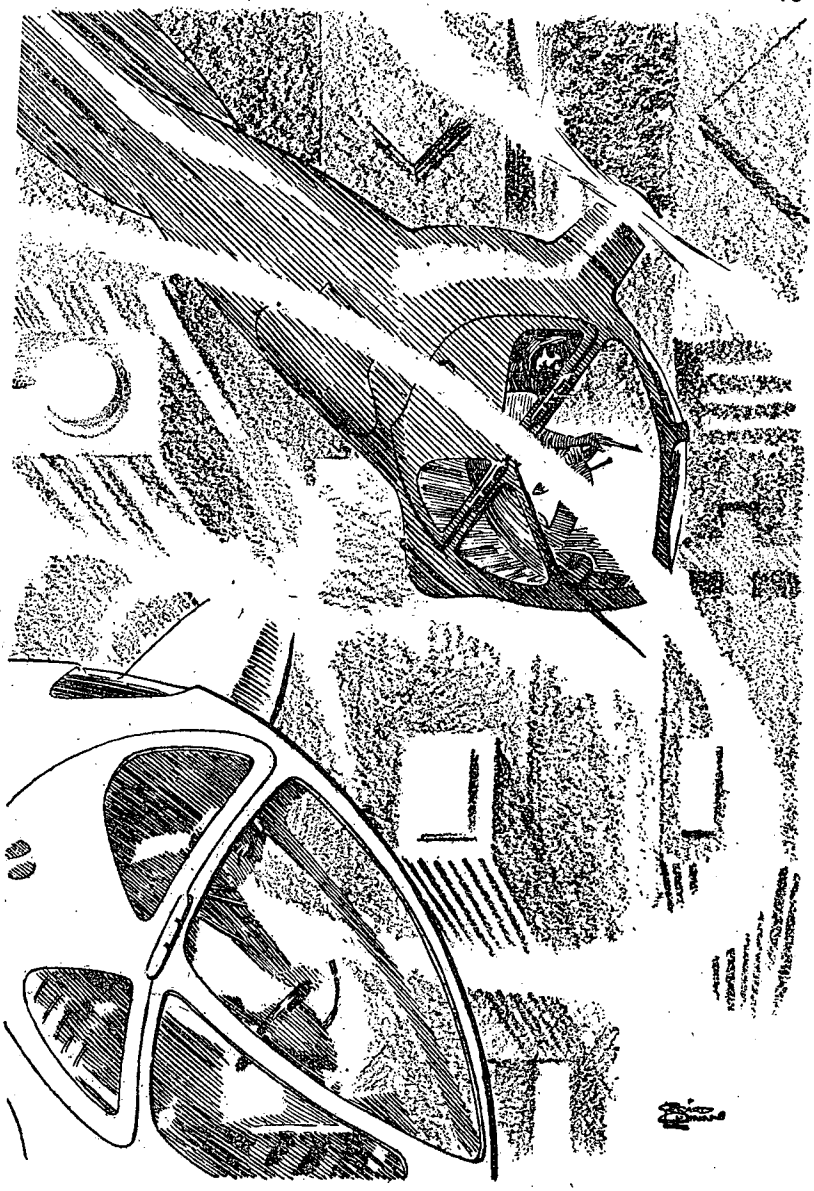

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VII.

It was late afternoon when he awoke in his apartment. His body felt cramped and tired. And there was a bitter taste in his mouth that made his tongue curl when he tried to moisten his lips. The ache in his stomach reminded him that he hadn't had food for the last twenty-four hours. With an effort he threw himself off his bed and to his feet. Uncertainly he walked towards the bathroom, dropping off his clothes as he went.

The soothing effect of the shower and beard-wipe-off didn't last long. By the time he got into a fresh suit his head was spinning and his stomach twisting into a knot. He silently cursed Ned and his own reckless foolishness all the way up to the Terrace drugstore.

After drinking nearly a quart of orange juice and cleaning up two platters of salmon steak with mushroom sauce, he felt calmer. The burning sensation and the jitters left him. He had almost forgotten how pleasant it was to be able to do something without having violent melodrama connected with it.

But back inside the apartment, he began feeling uneasy again. The more he seemed to learn, the more complicated and fantastic things became. He didn't know what to make of Ned. For that matter, he didn't know what to make of himself. Some time, apparently, things were supposed to resolve themselves into some kind of sense. But what kind of sense? Why was he hiding everything from himself? What unimaginable sort of scheme could be involved with his deliberate loss of identity-memory? If it had been deliberate . . . and judging from Ned's implication, it had. Could it be some sort of delayed-action crime he had prepared and set in motion, so that if accused he could pass a lie detector test with perfect sincerity, claiming that he knew nothing about it. But what crime?

He suddenly went cold inside. It might be better not to know what he had been up to between the time Laura dropped him in the woods and the time of his revival. He might even have been masquerading as someone else.

He felt that if he could only get to Laura everything would be straightened out. But she was on the run from him—he was supposed to be trying to kill her. Complications and more complications—none making any sense. And somewhere through it all, running like a tarnished silver thread, was April Jordan and his distrust of her.

Conrad stared out at the long evening shadows and dimming light. He had better start picking up the old and new loose ends and get back to work. Maybe this time he would be able to tie something together. He glanced at his watch. Exactly twenty-four hours had elapsed since he had seen Kyle, the Eye and Finger.

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He went over to the t-v, checked Kyle's number again in the directory, then dialled him. After a short buzz the metallic voice of the recorder secretary informed him that Kyle still wasn't in. This time he left a message for Kyle to call him immediately upon coming in.

Conrad felt another case of nerves coming on. Kyle was his only immediate hope of unravelling anything. He wanted desperately to talk to someone he could trust and Kyle seemed the only one because he was playing just for money. The others, whoever they were, were playing for much more.

He walked into the kitchen, grabbed a tumbler and headed for the bedroom. There was still some Scotch left in the second bottle and he poured himself a slug strong enough to lift a horse off its shoes.

After the alcohol had relaxed him and slowed his spinning brain, it occurred to him that he ought to check his own tape secretary for any messages. He located the recorder and pressed the play-back button.

Jameson's voice cut in telling him that the safe-vault retina lock had been checked and found in perfect order, The technician claimed that either Mr. Conrad had not looked squarely into the eyepiece or had forgotten to remove his glasses, if he wore glasses.

On hearing this, Conrad breathed more easily. At least he hadn't aroused suspicion out there. The caretaker rambled on for a few minutes about his carelessness of the night before, then cut off.

After another pause, the voice he had been hoping for greeted him. "This is Kyle. What's the matter? Too busy playing house with April Jordan ever to be home? I've dug up some interesting stuff and this is the third time I've buzzed, so I'll let the recorder have it. One of my boys dug up the dirt that you're not the only one. While you were away April's been playing house with a chap called Roderik Niles. Took most of your retainer and hired a couple of special out-of-town hoods. Got just a ghost of a lead—somebody's after your wife's scalp and she's on the run. Whoever they are, they're slick operators. Romulus and Remus, the names of my dirty-work boys, are being taken over a rough course. But your wife's leading them all an even rougher chase. At the moment I'm out in the field working on another slick angle called Roderik Niles—yeah, the other boy friend. Try buzzing me tonight."

Questions started going around again inside Conrad's head. Now a connection between Niles and April! He looked at the recorder light—it was still on, which meant there was more to come. Then he heard a voice he hadn't expected to hear.

"This is April . . . call me. Love you . . ."

That was all. The tape clicked off and the recorder light went out. He flicked the play-back on so that it would be sure to flash the moment any more messages were received.

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April didn't know it, but she was going to have an awfully long talk with him. He started to dial her before he realised he didn't have her number. He opened the directory and checked through the J's for a Jordan corresponding with her address. Again he went down the list. No April Jordan. Then he dialled the operator and received the news that her number was unlisted.

He rushed into the leather-walled room lined with books and pictures that was his study. In one corner of the massive horse-shoe shaped desk he found a video file. He pushed the J's and a gold card popped up with her number. He carried the card back and dialled a double X for Xanadu, then the rest of the number. It reminded him of the double cross and brought back his doubts about April more strongly than ever.

He listened to the buzzing at the other end longer than necessary before cutting off. Where was she now, he wondered?

Outside it was night. He ran his eye down the carefully planned diminishing perspective of the Terrace landscaping. Its dim outline, straight as an arrow, disappeared into the western darkness. Directly above its point of departure gleamed Venus, the star of love . . .

Love suddenly struck him as meaningless. All emotions were meaningless as long as, somewhere out there in the darker darkness, there was a telepath he had been conditioned to kill. And a character cast which seemed to be deliberately standing between them, an obstacle course of confusion and misdirection between him and Rene de Lamiter. Also there was his wife who was terrified of him—someone actually was trying to kill her, according to Kyle. There was April Jordan who was beginning to seem a little unbelievable, and a man calling himself Hypo Ned, who had helped him put into motion some vast unknown scheme. Also somewhere out there was somebody who wanted information he had in his safe-vault—a woman. And he knew only three women—Laura, von Rachin, and April. Which one? And there was Niles, his wife's brother.

The moon had come out of nowhere and was adding its light to the stars shining through the window. A stray reflection caught the corner of his eye—it was from the trimensional picture of Laura. The moonlight had vanished the vague touch of hardness about her. And her face looked as soft and warm as the moon. He felt his throat catch. Was he still in love with her?

He jumped as the sudden unexpected buzz of the t-v cut through the stillness. What now, he wondered? His hands trembled as he crossed over to the screen. He cut in the image. It was the police. "Conrad? Good. We want to report a burglary attempt at your residence—"

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The officer paused and Conrad tried to look properly startled. It was difficult looking startled when actually he felt a wave of relief on hearing the nature of the call. He listened to the rest of the report—how the marauder had made his escape before the police could arrive, how nothing apparently had been stolen. Would Mr. Conrad like a careful combing of his residence for clues?

Conrad said no, adding that the alarm system had not been checked for some time and might be defective. This was acknowledged with a curt, "As you wish. Goodnight."

The heavy stillness returned to the room. A glimmer of luminescence from his watch reminded him that he still hadn't turned on the lights. He was also reminded that he still had a telepath to find and destroy and that he would always have a telepath to find and destroy until he was found and destroyed. He grabbed a topcoat and left. He didn't have to ring for an aircab—he signalled one conveniently setting down near the Terrace taxi ramp.

The inside of the cab was dark, but the pilot bore a striking resemblance to someone he had seen recently.

"Say, you look like—" Conrad blurted out. Then he felt something hard and round jab into his left kidney. The pilot was Roderik Niles. He slowly turned his head, and in the darkness behind him made out the features of April Jordan. She was breathing heavily, but her hand holding the gun was firm and steady. He felt rage and puzzlement boiling up inside him. He felt like shouting a thousand questions—but what was the use? The answers would only add to the confusion.

They headed uptown, north, and no one said a word.

Gradually his anger subsided into confusion. That was it—he was being deliberately confused. He was being caught up in some monstrous plot of misdirection. Misdirection aimed at keeping him from finding Laura or misdirection deliberately aimed at keeping him from finding de Lamiter. No, that last couldn't be completely right. Because the somebody else who also wanted to learn de Lamiter's whereabouts would have to wait and allow him to get the information from the safe-vault. Unless there were two separate factions—one wanting de Lamiter as much as he did but for some different reason, and the other not wanting the first to find him. Dr. von Rachin had said he was the only key to the safe-vault and to de Lamiter. But why hadn't she warned him of these other complications? Or wasn't even she aware of them?

They were dropping down out of the sky and Conrad made out the shimmering silhouette of Xanadu's tower. At least the Grand Inquisition or what-not was going to be held amid luxurious surroundings. And he couldn't do anything to stop it, at least not yet. So far, Niles

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had kept a constant eye on him in the rear-view mirror, and the gun in April's grasp had jabbed harder and harder into his kidney. Somehow Niles managed to land the aircab without glancing away from the mirror. They rolled to a stop in front of the automatic lift April had disappeared into that morning.

Niles' voice was cold and deadly. All the emotion of the night before had gone out of it. "She'll plug you, Conrad, if you even curl your lips. That's no stungun she has rammed into you, it's a .38 Noiseless. It'll blow a hole big enough to put your head through." He paused. "All right, April, he's all yours."

The door opened and Conrad stepped down to the platform. The gun was no longer in his back, but he could sense that the muzzle was still aimed at the spot. Out of the corner of his eye he saw April jump down and skillfully conceal the weapon under the flying cape draped over her shouldees. Niles waited until they were inside the elevator, then left.

After a short descent they stepped out into an arched hallway of ebony and ivory. Flickering electronic torches cast their shadows over ceiling, floor, and walls. Conrad heard a sharp, high-pitched metallic whistle behind him and a padded door straight in front of him slide noiselessly open. He realised that instead of a retina lock she must have a sonic lock.

He stepped through the door and down into a sunken living-room. The hidden lighting shimmered dully off underslung pneumatic furniture. As far as he could see at a glance, the room was unoccupied. After taking three paces in from the door he stopped. She, too, had halted. He turned slightly and saw that she was fumbling with her free hand for the door switch. For an instant her eyes left his back. It was now or maybe never.

He whirled with all the power he had and walloped her almost hard enough to knock her head off. The blow caught her just under the point of the chin and she hit the floor with a heavy thud.

He finished switching the door shut, then picked her up and threw her down on a huge circular sofa. He went over to a small side-bar next to the wall and fumbled around until he got a heavy pitcher of icewater and a highball glass. He went back to the sofa, filled the glass full, then dashed the ice water as hard as he could straight into her face. He counted to ten and repeated the process. And again. There was a dirty-white welt under her chin where his fist had connected. He threw six more glasses into her face, and the bruise turned a livid pink before she started to come to.

She opened her eyes, started to move her jaw. Her hand automatically came up to her chin. She groaned when she felt the lump.

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He crossed over to the bar and came back with a brandy glass half full of whisky. He tried pouring some down her throat, but her lips closed and the rest trickled down her chin.

She stared into his face with a terrified expression. He went back to the bar and filled up the brandy glass again. When he returned she was crying softly with great convulsing sobs that shook her whole body. He walked over to the door and picked up the .38 Noiseless from where it had fallen, then came back and sat down on a circular coffee table in front of the sofa, waiting for her to get control of herself.

She turned a tear-stained face up into his. Her chin and lips quivered slightly when she saw the cold expression on his face. Her body trembled as she exhaled a futile sigh. At last she found her voice—it sounded broken and tired. "How can I make you believe that I still love you?"

Conrad laughed out loud. She couldn't have said anything sillier. How stupid could she possibly think he was? Or was she doing an about-face now that the cards were stacked against her? That was the only thing she could do. But he was cold inside as well as outside now. Impervious to any emotional traps from her or anyone else. He was only interested in finding who had given her her part to play. For an instant he thought of trying to smash it out of her pretty face. But he realised he didn't have the guts for that—yet. Besides, he had no point of reference with which to check whether or not she would be telling the truth.

She gave another sigh and began talking slowly in a whispery voice. "It all started late this afternoon. This morning after you left me I decided to go to bed until noon, thinking and hoping you might call. I couldn't sleep, so I took a heavy soporific . . . At five this afternoon, the door chimes woke me. Instead of switching on the peep-hole screen to see who it was, I hurried to the door; positive it was you. It was Roderik Niles and there was a gun in his hand."

For a moment April stopped for breath, as if hoping he would show doubt enough to start questioning her. When he didn't she went on. "Roderik said he'd received a call from Laura shortly after your return from wherever you were when you disappeared. She was extremely frightened and told him you were trying to have her killed. She didn't say why, but she said it had all started several hours after she'd found out you were back—and that someone was following her even then, while she was making the call to Roderik. Then she cut off and he hasn't been able to find her since. He said he'd been unsuccessful the other night in trying to choke out of you whatever you might know about Laura—so he now wanted to try the subtle approach, using me as the Mata Hari. I told him to get the hell out

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of here. Then he reminded me of a certain . . . something he has on me. So—under the threat of having this . . . something made known—I agreed to see what I could do."

Conrad felt contempt. "What a lying bitch you've turned out to be." But he said it softly. "While I was away, what about this sleepy-time business with Niles?"

She gave a gasp. "How? Oh, no! Who told you?. . . That's what he had on me and threatened to tell you." She was in tears now. "For the past two weeks I've been with Roderik—there's nothing serious in it, just an arrangement of convenience . . . In spite of his emotional unbalance, or perhaps because of it, he does have a certain attractiveness for women . . . Oh, hell, Al, he's nothing in any way compared to you. I realise now, I shouldn't have got mixed up with him, but when you disappeared I kind of went smash—too many parties, too much liquor, and the next thing I knew—Roderik Niles. But why go on? I mean nothing to him and he certainly means nothing to me."

She paused, staring up at him for some sign of belief. Her hand reached out for his, but he made no move to take it. Again she searched his face for a trace of sympathy. Finding none, she turned her face away, withdrew her trembling hand and said in a choked-up voice, "Oh, hell, I don't know what good it will do now, but since I've started I may as well finish. There's not much more to tell. Just before Roderik left here today, someone called him and there was an excited conversation. When it was over, he told me things had been changed, that he would know positively within an hour whether or not you were mixed up in any way with whoever was attempting to kill Laura. And he gave me a Noiseless and told me to disregard the 'call me' message I'd just left you, that he was going to drop me at your place where I was to wait for you, then hold you—if necessary, using the gun for persuasion—until I heard from him. He was in a tremendous hurry, so he rushed me up to the roof landing-stage and over to the only jet on the platform—an empty aircab. The pilot must have been down helping someone up with luggage, so we took it."

Conrad said nothing, loudly.

"After we were in the air, he somehow convinced me that, since I loved you, my keeping you in your house during the fireworks would be the safest place for you. And in my sleep-drugged state, it all began to sound very logical. As we were nearing your place, he called some leg man with a wrist-talkie, who had apparently been checking on you, and was told that you had just left your place and were walking towards the taxi ramp. But by that time, we had already landed—and there you were. To avoid any possible scene, Roderik told me to stick the gun

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into you—that we'd take you back up to my place where I could explain to you why what was happening had happened. So, as he instructed me to do, I did the rest—and here we are. I thought you'd be safer here if you—if Laura is dead."

Conrad asked just one question, trying to keep all emotion out of his voice. "Why didn't you tell me all this the moment we were alone in the elevator, or while we were walking through the corridor, or when we stepped inside your door?"

April cringed at the deadliness in his voice. "Oh, darling, I don't know why I didn't! Roderik told whoever had been watching you to jump in a cab and, if possible, to get here ahead of us to see if the coast was clear, then to wait down inside the corridor until he came back again, after dropping us off. I didn't have time to explain anything in the elevator because he might have been waiting in the corridor when we stepped out. Then when I didn't see him I was so relieved that I decided to carry on the act until we were alone inside my apartment and surprise you by throwing away the gun—and myself into your arms. But you hit me before I could close the door."

Conrad laid down the .38 and took out his stungun. The muzzle was pointed straight at her breast. His face must have betrayed what he was about to do. She started to scream, then the full stunning force of the gun hit her. He put the gun in his pocket. It had been set for maximum force. That would keep her on ice for two or three hours. He was suddenly glad things had happened the way they had. He was even glad she had tried to lie her way out. She lied to him, she lied to Niles, she probably even lied to herself. Always wanting to be on the winning side. But now she was out of the game, at least the important part of his game.

He smiled as he looked down on her lovely face and body, rigid and quiet except for the faint tremor of her breathing. In a way, it was a smile of admiration. But it was too bad she lied so much. She had real talent. She could think with the speed of a striking snake. He was positive she had no idea he would turn the tables so quickly and so violently on her. Or that he would turn them at all. Yet, almost immediately she had manufactured a beautiful tale to justify everything. And when he had spotted the most glaring hole of all, she had plugged that up with the most beautiful emotional touch, ". . . and surprise you by throwing away the gun—and myself into your arms."

He was walking towards the door when his foot skidded out from under him and he fell to the floor. Something shiny rolled across the carpet. He got to his feet and picked it up. It was the whistle that activated the sonic lock. He decided to keep it. On cold, windy

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evenings he could take it out and think of gorgeous April Jordan, the girl who was lying herself to death.

He pressed the door button and stepped out into the corridor of flickering torches and shadows. The door had already closed behind him when he saw the man at the far end of the corridor raise a gun.

So this part of April's story had been true !

Conrad realised there wasn't time to blow the whistle and get back inside. He ducked and ran along the rear wall into the dancing shadows. His own gun was in his hand now, but the other man was also weaving back and forth with the shadows on the far wall.

So far neither had hit the other because of the flickering light. Any moment now Conrad expected to feel the paralyzing blow . . . Then the man at the far end toppled to the floor. Conrad stopped holding his breath. He wondered what to do with the body. Since it didn't matter, he decided to leave it there. He walked past the body and stepped into the waiting elevator, hoping there was nobody inside. There wasn't. After a quick ascent he calmly walked out into the darkness.

VIII.

He rang for an aircab and later paid off the pilot at the parking platform where he had left *The Needle* earlier in the day. He wasn't sure and he couldn't tell, but he had more than just a vague feeling that he was being watched. Whom by or why, he didn't know. But this time the important thing was that he was suspected. Finally he had become aware that suspicion had the value of alerting an individual. And from now on he intended to be constantly on the alert—no more April Jordan cul-de-sacs.

After easing the jet into the night sky he checked the weather, then, with the controls still in manual, he headed for Atlantic Highlands and Sleep-Tanks. He let his thoughts roam back over the last three days—the only three days that he could remember. He was still a long way off from anything. Fortunately no one new had been added to the cast to further complicate things. He and Laura still seemed to be the chief plot motivaters. Why everyone was so interested in them, he couldn't understand, unless it was a cover-up for the real interest, Rene de Lamiter. But maybe things would finally start making sense as soon as he found de Lamiter and got rid of the deadly psychological compulsion the lovely Dr. von Rachin had forced on him.

Val von Rachin—another irritating paradox. His resentment of her and what she had done to him, in spite of the altruistic reasons she had given, was beginning to border almost on hate, despite his agreeing

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with her reasons at the time. It suddenly gave him a powerful feeling to realise that her hypnotic touches were wearing off. The compulsion block was still there, but the reasons behind it had begun to seem less real and less important. Whether this was good or bad, he didn't know. Maybe she was completely justified in using him against his will. Perhaps she had felt that it had to be that way—considering what sort of person he had been, she couldn't take chances. Not with the stars almost within the grasp of Mankind—and Mankind on Earth in the moral shape it was. You shouldn't spread moral disease . . . not to other planets.

He stared long and hard up at the cold splatters of brilliance until his eyes watered. She was probably as lonely as the stars . . . What a strange woman she would be to love. He suddenly threw all thoughts of her out of his head. There was something even hypnotic in thinking about her—and something dangerous.

After checking his position with the automatic course-plotting map furnished to him by Central Control, he cut his speed to 150 and descended down the clear glittering face of night. Atlantic Highlands sparkled below him and to his left, the curve of Sandy Hook loomed darkly against the moon-drenched surface of the ocean. Slowly he circled down, watching the sky for anyone following him. Moonlight glinted up at him from the translucent dome of Sleep-Tanks.

The street bordering the south entrance was dark and empty. He sat *The Needle* down in front of the entrance and climbed out. Through the dome Sleep-Tanks was an oval of blackness, except for a murky ray of light coming from the caretaker's cubicle. Conrad tried the revolving door. It circled open. Why hadn't Jameson obeyed his orders to keep the door locked?

Conrad went through and walked over to the cubicle, irritation mounting in him at every step. Why couldn't the public trustees or whoever was temporarily handling his affairs at least hire someone competent to look after his property? He gave the cubicle door a push, not bothering to knock.

Someone who wasn't Jameson jumped up from the cot. "Mr. Conrad?"

"Who are you? Where's Jameson?"

"My name's Marken—Richard Marken," the man said. "Jameson is ill and I was sent out to relieve him."

Conrad looked at Marken's rough clothing and at his clean-cut, middle-aged appearance. At least they had got someone out here this time who looked intelligent and competent.

"Didn't Jameson or anybody mention to you my orders about keeping the entrance locked at all times?"

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"No. . . I'll lock the south entrance now. It's the only one open."

To make sure he did it properly, Conrad went out with him. On the way back, he asked him if the buildings and offices were still all locked.

"Yes, Mr. Conrad. Nothing has been unlocked. Would you like me to open Administration and your office?"

How did Marken know he didn't have keys to his own building and office? "Give me the keys and I can do it myself."

Marken gave a ring of keys on his belt a jingle. "All I have is the single set. I would prefer not to part with them. In case of some emergency—"

"All right, it's not important. Just so I get in." Conrad started off in the direction of Administration with Marken following. Except for the rustle of their clothing the soundproof silence remained utterly dead. Conrad glanced over at Marken who was lighting a cigarette. Apparently he hadn't familiarized himself too well with the building layout. Whenever Conrad made a turn, Marken lagged a second or so behind him. No one said anything. Conrad suddenly became nervous. He didn't know why. But he found the silence and Marken disconcerting. And for some reason, the brightness of the moonlight hurt his eyes.

They came to Administration and after finding the matching key for the lock number, Marken pushed open the door and stepped through after Conrad. Neither one could locate the foyer or corridor lights. Marken hadn't brought a flash, so they fumbled their way in until Conrad located his office door. After more key trying Marken got the door open and Conrad, remembering where the lights were kept, snapped them on. He glanced around the office. Everything had been straightened up. Even his desk pad had been changed. He now had a grey one.

He looked up to see Marken still standing inside the doorway. "Well?"

"Don't you want me to wait and lock up after you?"

"I'll t-v you when I'm ready for that."

Marken disappeared into the corridor darkness. Conrad was on the point of rushing over to the retina lock when it occurred to him that somebody else might have walked through the south entrance, unannounced and as simply as he had. Someone, possibly, who had been waiting and hoping for just such an opportunity. There wasn't much he could do about that possibility now. He went over and carefully closed the office door, making sure it would stay locked from the outside. Without a key, it would take a tremendous amount of noise to open the door.

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He then decided it might be wise to call Marken and ask him to prowl around Administration and keep an eye peeled for anyone who might have wandered deliberately in besides himself. He clicked on the screen and punched the WATCHMAN button. He got nothing but a faint buzzing from the other end. Marken probably hadn't got back yet.

He allowed himself to be lured over to the liquor cabinet. After mixing a very light bourbon he sat back down at his desk and pondered whether he should study the records here or take them to some safer place. The only safe place he could think of was high up in the air in his jet. He drank slowly, then called Marken again. There still wasn't any answer. Maybe he was in the midst of making his rounds.

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Marken was too cool a number to let anything take him by surprise. Besides, he had noticed that he was carrying a .38 Noiseless as well as a stungun.

Deciding not to wait any longer for Marken he got up and pressed his eye to the retina lock. There was a faint whisper of hidden movement, then the safe door slid quietly open, lights clicking on inside the vault.

He was surprised to see that it was another office even larger than the one he was standing in. The walls and ceiling were of a grey lustreless metal that was probably impervious to almost everything. He stepped through and studied the contents of the vault. There were both regular and microfilm files covering one whole wall. A large metal table was against the opposite wall. At the far end of the room was a coffin-shaped object made of the same dull metal as the vault. He walked over. There was a small tag at either the foot or the head of the box: Mark I, Original Production Model. Probably the only sleep-tank left that wasn't in use? What a lovely way to commit suicide without dying—to commit suicide only in the present. Here was his way out, if he ever needed an escape to the future.

He tore his attention away from the tank and crossed over to the micro files. They were separated into district categories by labels. Sales Records was what he wanted. That might give the installment-place data on all tanks, including de Lamiter's. He set the dial for the D's-and-after-a-few-clicks-the-D film began to run rapidly across the ground glass screen set above the files. He was somewhat startled to see Alfred Drake's name and data flash by, then he realised that he had passed the De's—and no de Lamiter. He tried the L film combinations before finally shutting off the sales records.

He went through several more types of files, each time getting referred to a new cross-index. Finally he ran out of files. And it wasn't until then that he spotted a single drawer section marked Personals. He opened it and took out two ledger-type books. One was labelled *De Lamiter*, the other, *Alfred Drake*.

Why all the information on Drake, he wondered? Apparently Drake had purchased a sleep-tank but, as yet, hadn't used it. He had been at his party the night before but had not met him. Perhaps he knew him well. What connection could there be between him and Drake? Drake was director of Trans-Lunar Spaceways, an extremely wealthy and powerful man. Perhaps they had been friends at one time, or maybe still were. He would have to call on Drake. But first he had better check on what was contained in the ledger. He tucked both volumes under his arm and started for the vault entrance.

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As he approached the entrance, more and more of his office came into view, the warm leather and wood tones contrasting almost brightly against the dull grey vault interior. His step was carrying him through the entrance when the office door came within his range of vision.

It was open !

His skin prickled. His steps had already carried him through. Out of the corner of his eye, to the left, he caught sight of Marken sitting at his desk, a cigarette dangling nonchalantly from his mouth and his hand coming up fast with the .38 Noiseless.

Conrad tried to dive back inside the safe-vault, but the door had automatically closed when he stepped through. He smashed up against it at the same moment the .38 spat. There was a thud and a ripping noise as the heavy calibre slug tore through the ledgers and across his clothing. The impact and shock knocked the books from under his arm. The floor was racing up at him . . . He hit it face down, for a moment thinking the slug had gone through him. Paralyzed he waited for the finishing shot.

Then he heard Marken scrambling over to the ledgers and thumbing through them. Conrad continued to play dead, realising that Marken must have thought the bullet had been fatal. There was nothing he could do now but lie there. He didn't dare chance a shot with his stungun—not while Marken had a .38 that was still inches away. He heard the books slam shut, then Marken's calm breathing over him. He could sense Marken's eyes staring down at him, deliberating whether or not to put in another shot. Then Marken kicked him heavily in the ribs. With fantastic self-control he possessed he managed to lie still without gasping. Tears of pain formed under his eyelids.

After another long pause he felt Marken's hands under his armpits, dragging him to his feet. He let himself go wholly limp. Marken seemed to be trying to hold him up against the wall. Then his head and eyes were pressed against the retina lock. Marken pulled open his eyelids—and the door slid open and he was shoved through.

Marken was going to lock him in his own safe-vault. And no one else could open it. As he hit the vault floor Conrad glanced out of the corner of his eye at Marken who had already turned and was walking out the entrance. The door would close automatically when one walked out—lock. Conrad realised that it was now too late to chance the stungun . . .

But the door *didn't* close. With a curse Marken stepped back inside the entrance and out again. This time Conrad realised that the door would only close when *he* walked through. He reached into his coat pocket and yanked out the gun.

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Marken was just turning again when Conrad pressed the stud. The look of surprise on his face was paralyzed there as he toppled to the floor, .38 still clenched in his fist.

Conrad lay collapsed where he had fallen, waiting for his heart to stop pounding, his hands to stop shaking. He marvelled at his foresight in making the vault door a personalized one. He finally got to his feet and dragged Marken further into the vault and stood contemplating the phony watchman for a moment. This was one time somebody was really going to answer some questions. Conrad looked at his watch. In about three hours he should be hearing who Marken really was, who actually wanted the de Lamiter data, and biggest of all—why.

He removed the gun from Marken's grasp, then searched him for any other weapons or cutting instruments. All he found was a wallet. He opened it and a slip of paper fell out. It was the paper Dr. von Rachin had given him with de Lamiter's retina pattern. He carefully stuffed it into his own wallet, feeling elated and realising that at last he was really beginning to get some place. Since he had to call Kyle anyway, he might as well let him in on this other side of his troubles. Besides, Kyle would be much better suited to go to work on Marken, no doubt being well versed in the art of extracting information. Somehow he would explain things to Kyle so that nothing the lovely von Rachin had conditioned him not to tell would slip out—not that it could. Or that it made any real difference now. Apparently any number of other people knew about de Lamiter.

Conrad went back in and sat down at his desk, clicking on the t-v as he did so. He turned around and checked to make sure the safe-vault door had closed for him when he walked through. He would have to work fast. Marken might have others waiting or coming for him. He had forgotten Kyle's number, so he had the operator look it up for him. There was a long pause after he had dialled Kyle, before the screen at the other end cut in.

Kyle looked dead on his feet. He peered at Conrad as though his eyesight was failing him. Heavy dark pouches under the pale blueness of his eyes made them glitter with a deadly intensity.

"Oh, it's you." His voice was hoarse and tired, but it sounded relieved. "I just found Romulus and Remus upstairs on the landing platform *vaccinated*. Couldn't get hold of you to report. Thought your call lines might be tapped, so I wired you a tape."

"Vaccinated?" Conrad was uneasy and puzzled by Kyle's appearance and voice.

"Vaccinated with a .38! They look like a couple of sieves. It happened about an hour ago, just after I got a call from them. They

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were about to close in on your wife's Nemesis when it closed in on them. I've got a line on where she was last headed. I'm going to try to get to her before these fly-boys who got Romulus and Remus get back on the trail again. Incidentally, are you really sure it isn't you who's trying to kill your wife ? No, I'm only half-joking, but you'll see what I mean tomorrow. In the meantime, you might take a quick refresher course on a party named Rene de Lamiter—see if you can remember or find out what you knew about him. It's beginning to look as if he might fit into things somewhere. In fact, I'm going to go out now and try to fit him in. Why don't you come down here and wait for me ? I'm leaving the door open—I'll let you know in about an hour whether the game's over. And if you don't hear from me you'll know the game's up. But get over here. I'll need some—"

A look of astonishment came over Kyle's haggard features. His mouth gaped open and slowly, as if in a dream his head crashed through the t-v screen. There was an explosion from the machine—then darkness.

Conrad sprang into action without quite knowing what he should do first. He had to get to Kyle and fast ! Kyle was his only trustworthy link with anything. He prayed that Kyle wasn't dead as he hunted around his office for something with which to tie up Marken.

Finally he took a letter opener from his desk and slashed long strips of leather from the padded walls. After opening the vault, he propped Marken up against the nearest vault wall and tied his wrists and ankles, then bound them together behind his back. He took another strip of leather and wrapped it tight around his mouth, first inserting a gag. This was in case Marken came to before he got back and tried chewing through his bonds.

He walked out of the vault, leaving Marken slumped up against the wall. He made sure the door closed behind him before picking up the two ledgers and rushing out of his office and Administration.

A chill October wind had come up, blowing heavy rain clouds across the moon and stars. He stopped short. *The wind was blowing here inside the dome.* Marken must have opened all the entrances in the event that he had to get out in a hurry.

He turned up his coat collar around his neck as he rushed across the soundproof grounds towards the south entrance. Shadows, swept by the wind, flung themselves against the building walls. What a perfect camouflage, Conrad thought, for anyone stalking him. At the thought, a chill colder than the wind tingled over his scalp.

All the rest of the way to the cubicle he tried to keep in shadows as much as possible. As he neared it, his heart suddenly pounded faster. Outside the enclosure, parked just ahead of his own jet, was another !

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At that moment there was a flash of lightning and Conrad ducked through the door of the cubicle. Very faintly through the dome he caught the dim rumble of thunder and the patter of rain. What was he to do now? Should he take a chance on getting through the enclosure entrance and into his jet? Or should he try to figure some way of luring whoever was out there in the other jet, waiting for him or Marken, away from the plant?

He decided that it would take too much time and be too risky. The only thing to do was make a dash for it. He waited for the next lightning flash to flare and die before running for the south entrance. After having watched both Jameson and Marken do it, it took him only a second to work the simple lock mechanism. He had no qualms now about leaving the entrance open. Every other entrance was open —besides, he was certain he had under his arm what everybody was looking for.

He got through the revolving door and with a running leap made it into *The Needle*. Except for intermittent lightning flashes, rain and darkness had descended over everything. His hands trembled as he worked the controls. The whole jet might have been tampered with. but the rotors overhead hissed into life and he jumped *The Needle* up into the wind and rain-filled darkness.

Before he had a chance to crack his tailpipe throttle, he saw the other jet's rotors wheel into fiery life. He blasted in his tailpipe with full throttle and climbed for the hidden stars.

At 10,000 he broke through the storm into a transparent sky of glittering blue. He got his bearings, then turned towards Manhattan. The other jet was nowhere in sight. He stopped sweating and tried to relax. Then the other jet broke through the silvery floor of clouds just ahead of him. Immediately it throttled back and climbed to a position just above and behind him.

There was a crash and a slug went tearing through the cabin over his shoulder and down into the t-v. The tube imploded with a pop! and little splinters of glass and metal went flying through the air and into his face. He could feel blood from small cuts streaming down his cheeks.

An instant later, the second jet pulled up along side him. In spite of having to blink his eyes to keep the blood out, he could see fairly well across into the other cabin. He had no difficulty making out a hand holding a big .38, motioning him down. Also he thought he saw the person's lips moving. Conrad tried by motions to make it clear that his t-v was out—all the while cursing himself for having left Marken's .38 behind. A stungun would be no good up here. The 38 would kill him before he could fire it.

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Suddenly in desperation Conrad slammed the wheel-control over to the left as far as it would go. With a skidding lunge *The Needle* headed straight for the other jet. Panic gripped him—the jet wasn't going to swing away ! They would crash ! He closed his eyes.

At the last second, the other jet had pulled away and, in doing so, disappeared into the sea of silver. Realising his bluff had worked, Conrad recovered his nerve. He shoved the wheel all the way forward and rocketed down into the shimmering cloud sea. He dived through 9,000 feet of wind and rain and darkness.

After cutting the tailjet and levelling off, he again headed for Manhattan, hoping that he had lost the other ship. His radio-beam was completely gone. The only way he could be sure of hitting Manhattan was by contact navigation. He turned back on the tailpipe and pushed his horizontal speed up to 100, then began a vertical descent to almost sea level. He cut on his landing lights and watched them shining down through the blackness to the rain-spattered ocean. He continued his low-altitude northeast course until he hit the Brooklyn shoreline. He jumped up to 500 per and made a beeline for Manhattan.

A gust of wind suddenly shot *The Needle* up to 800 feet. There was a momentary rift in the rain clouds and not more than 75 yards away from him he saw the other jet. Then the clouds closed in again. His heart was pounding and his palms were sweaty. He had forgotten about the other ship being able to radar-track him.

IX

Huge ultra-sonic weather vibrators had cleared the visibility over lower Manhattan almost completely. Conrad dropped down into the first heavy uptown traffic pattern he spotted. This put him ahead of his follower who had to wait for the next hole in the pattern before being able to take up the chase again.

At what had once been Columbus Circle, Conrad jumped out of the traffic and cut diagonally across the dark waste of Central Park. The west end of 67th Street loomed ahead of him and he cut off the tail jet. He made out Kyle's roof number, then settled slowly down on coasting rotors to the landing platform.

Firmly clasping the two ledgers under his arm, he dropped down from the ship and ran down the stairs to Kyle's door. He pushed it open and stepped through. One dim lamp was burning, its light sparkling on the pool of blood Kyle was lying face down in. The whole back of his head had been shot off. Bits of t-v screen glass were scattered all over the floor and they crunched sickeningly under his feet as he walked further into the room.

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He felt hopelessly defeated. With Kyle out of the picture, he was practically right back where he started. Was Laura still alive? Far down in his mind it began to seem almost incredible that she had eluded everyone for so long. It was almost as though there really wasn't any Laura.

Suddenly he heard someone coming down the stairs. Quickly and quietly he tiptoed over to close Kyle's door. Glass crunched under his feet and the footsteps stopped. Carefully he swung the door shut until it was open only a crack. He got down on his hands and knees to make less of a target area and peered through the slit.

In the flickering fluorescent lighting a woman stood halfway up the stairs, hesitant and listening. One arm protruded from the flying cape thrown over her shoulders. She was holding a gun, a .38 Noiseless. Her hair was blonde. She was the Laura of the pictures.

His voice came out in a hoarse shout. "*Laura*!"

She started and he flung open the door and jumped up. "Don't shoot!" he called. "I'm not—"

She leaped back against the stair wall and raised the gun. Then everything happened at once. Conrad heard a crunch of glass behind him and whirled to see a hairy fist come crashing down into his face. Stars exploded in his head and he reeled backwards, clawing at the wall for support. He felt his body hit the lamp table—then he and the lamp crashed to the floor and into darkness.

Stunned, he lay there listening to the zip-and-hiss of a Noiseless. Slowly his mind cleared as he realised what was happening. He got to his feet just in time to see two men picking Laura's crumpled form out of a widening pool of blood. Then they were disappearing up the stairs, carrying her between them. Conrad felt a wrenching sickness in the pit of his stomach. He swallowed hard and rushed up the stairs after the fading footfalls. Somehow through it all he had managed to hang onto the ledgers. With his free arm and hand he yanked out the stungun, wondering what good he could possibly do with it against somebody with a .38.

He reached the roof platform just in time to see the flaring tailpipe of a jet disappearing into the night. He jumped into his own and arched up in a high whining climb, jet on full blast.

Somewhere ahead and above him he made out the other jet, its pipe glowing like a ruby cigar tip. Then it cut across the midtown traffic pattern and was gone. He cut down dangerously low under the pattern and turned down his tailpipe. For a moment he continued drifting along, searching for them—then gave it up. Somehow he knew Laura was dead.

All life seemed to drain out of him. He began to feel ill, his eyes

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became hot and dry. His mind felt dead and lifeless. It was strange how he could feel so strongly about a woman he could not ever remember making love to. And now everyone was gone. Kyle, Laura, everyone—except April. And Niles.

April Jordan—clever April—who told too many lies and pulled all the strings and wanted everything for herself—maybe even Rene de Lamiter. With a singleness of purpose forming in his mind, he turned *The Needle* uptown. He felt like killing her. Her foolish lies had delayed him, had caused these deaths . . .

His mind became a blank as he flew uptown to Xanadu Tower. He couldn't picture anything except April's lovely face. His brain didn't start functioning again until he had landed and parked on the Tower roof platform. Going down in the elevator he searched his pockets until he felt the sonic whistle. He wasn't quite sure what he was going to do.

He stepped out of the lift and slowly walked down the barbarically lit corridor. No one was in sight. Niles' henchman had disappeared. All was quiet except for the sound of his footfalls. He put the little whistle to his lips and blew lightly into it. The door heard the sound, opening with an almost noiseless click.

Inside, all was darkness except where the corridor light fell through the doorway. Then he started. Roderik Niles was lying inside—his chest covered with blood. His eyes were staring straight up, as round and glassy as marbles.

Lovely April. So she had got him, too. And was she waiting for him somewhere in the blackness?

There was no way of telling except to enter. Silhouetted in the doorway he had already allowed himself to be a perfect target. With a deep breath he quickly stepped through, snapping the door shut with the wall switch. He stood still a moment. There was not a sound from the blackness. Carefully he made his way around Niles and across the floor to the lamp behind the sofa. His toe came into contact with the coffee table. He stepped around it and started to walk between the sofa-end and the t-v screen.

His foot caught on something and in the darkness he lost his balance and fell to the floor, his stungun falling out of his pocket and bouncing quietly on the heavy rug. In slow, circular motions he began searching for it. One palm came in contact with a wet spot. He lifted up his hand and put it down again, this time on some object that had the feel of lumpy rubber, almost like a doll's face. Then his fingers became entwined in something that felt like hair.

In panic he jerked his hand away and tumbled over backwards trying to get away from the thing he had touched. His hand was sticky and wet and he caught the smell of blood.

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Somehow he got to his feet and stumbled over to the table behind the sofa. His fumbling hands almost knocked off the lamp before he got it turned on. April was just as dead as Laura and the rest . . .

He walked over to where April lay. There was a hole through her right breast. She lay face up in a crumpled heap, her skirt hiked up around her thighs. The amber-dust on her legs glistened dully. Carefully he pulled her skirt down over her lovely legs. His teeth were on edge. Sex appeal, blood, and death didn't make a pretty mixture.

He finally turned away and stared at the rest of the room. Everything seemed to be in order—no sign of a struggle or fight. His head suddenly began to ache fiercely. Now everybody was dead . . . Except himself.

Why should that be, he wondered? In some strange way was he responsible for their deaths? With April dead his last link with the past was gone. The thought slowly whirled around in his head like a merry-go-round.

He bent down and wiped the blood off his hand on the underside of the sofa. Then he walked straight to the door, not looking at April again, and trying not to look at Niles. At the door he turned and threw the little silver whistle across the room to April. Just what kind of gesture he meant by that, he didn't know. But never again did he ever want to be reminded of her.

No one had seen him come or leave. Of that he was certain. He didn't want to get involved with the mess of April's death. He didn't even want to think about what side she might have been on in the confused tangle of cross-purposes that seemed to make up his life. She was an enigma—as was Laura—as was Von Rachin. And he had felt something resembling love for all of them, which was also an enigma.

But he, too, was an enigma. *He was the enigma.* Everything else could be explained if *he* could be explained. For the first time—possibly because the trees had been cleared away—he began to see the forest.

What about himself? He hadn't been able to discover what motivated the others because somebody hadn't wanted him to know what was motivating him. The whole complex plot seemed to have been contrived to confuse and misdirect him from—himself. Why?

He cut over the midtown traffic pattern and slid down in a long curve to Sky Terrace and his house. He dropped down to the roof and felt the automatic grapples connect with the landing gear.

After stepping inside the door and snapping on the lights, he carefully hid the two ledgers behind a shelf of books. Then he began to wonder what he should tell the police. Anything? Would he continue

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to be immune to their probings and inquiries, or would they this time hold him? And perhaps this time Dr. von Rachin wouldn't have sufficient power to force them to ignore him in view of four slaughtered people.

For an instant it crossed his mind that there might be two Alister Conrads playing some deadly game against each other. If that were the case, then his double was far ahead of him. He stood in a dazed reverie contemplating a Doppelganger explanation for everything.

Had he actually planned this nightmare for himself? His powers of reasoning seemed slowly being destroyed by one shock after another. Someone seemed to have stolen control of his life along with his memory. Or had he stolen his own memory? Why had he placed himself in such a nightmarish situation? Had he intended only false amnesia —and something had gone wrong?

For some time now, his body had been feeling increasingly stiff and rigid, a little off balance—like a statue about to topple over. His watch read half-past four. The lateness of the hour combined with nervous exhaustion dimmed his awareness and he toppled down on the sofa in a heavy sleep.

X

There seemed to be a gigantic bumblebee roaring around the room. It grew louder and louder, then buzzed right through his head and out his ears. His heart gave a leap and he jumped up as the buzzing receded across the room. His eyes popped open into the rising sun outside the eastern bank of picture windows. The bright light cleared his head and the ominous sound that had frightened him became the insistent buzz of the t-v screen.

He didn't realise how jittery he was until his hand fumbled three times in turning on the cut-in switch. His heart gave another surge when he saw his watch. Who could be calling him at seven in the morning?

It was Jameson. He had a wild and dishevelled appearance and was so upset that he had difficulty keeping his false teeth in his mouth.

The shock of relief at seeing Jameson's face was so pleasant that it wasn't until Jameson had finished, minutes later, and cut the connection that it fully registered on Conrad what had been said.

The old man had just come to from a dose of stungunning topped off with a soporific vapour tablet stuffed up his nose. Early the evening before someone had called through the south entrance announcing that there was a special delivery package for Alister Conrad too delicate to trust to the pneumatic mailing chute. Jameson had revolved open

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the entrance. The next thing he knew was that he was regaining consciousness in the wardrobe of the cubicle.

Conrad had told him that he would be right out, and in the meantime to lock the rest of the entrances and make a thorough check of the grounds. Twice Jameson had suggested calling the authorities, but Conrad had squelched that. He didn't want any outside interference until he learned a little more about just what sort of game his real self was playing with his amnesic self. And von Rachin puzzled him. Why wasn't she aware of all the things going on? Unless his former self, knowing that he was going to suffer real amnesia, had done such a masterful job of disguising everything, that even she wasn't aware of his rat-in-the-maze predicament. That sounded improbable considering her unlimited information sources. But perhaps she knew everything, perhaps she had already realised, even before he had, that psychologically there were two Alister Conrads acting—one past, and one present—and that she had control over only one.

Still, that was a dangerous assumption, but a thing he would have to check—since it was becoming increasingly apparent that his pre-amnesic self was the key to some fantastic storehouse of answers. That still didn't explain why the unseen hand, if it truly had been set up by his earlier self, had removed both Laura and April, two of the strongest connecting links with his past. After carefully examining that line of thought, there was no doubt in his mind that it was vitally important to his real self that his present self should not be allowed to discover what his real self had been up to. He had arranged amnesia to prevent that. Or had he been given amnesia to prevent his knowing *why* he had been given amnesia?

Stated that way, it was a flawless circle of reasoning. But like any syllogistic form of logic it had told him nothing he didn't already know, but it had shown him why he didn't know, and why he couldn't know. The question-answer paradox would be solved only when he reached a point in time already set up by his earlier self that would trigger away his amnesia. He realised that all he had to do to find his real self—which was in hiding in his mind with all the real answers—was to keep on living. If he could . . .

Darker thoughts began to cross his mind. If he himself had set up the protection machinery which had killed Laura and April and the others who had accidentally become involved, it had been an incredibly vicious precautionary measure just to keep himself out of contact with his past self. But perhaps this string of murders was the goal, and amnesia a device to pass him safely through the questions and lie detectors of the police. So . . . *Let not they left hand know what thy right hand doeth.*

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Schizophrenia would soon wedge itself between the two halves of his brain, and his mind would be a no-man's-land if he didn't straighten things out. Whatever his earlier self had done in the past, was done. Perhaps there had even been some justification and reason for the deaths of Laura and April.

He realised that his real self must have long ceased to love either of them. They had endangered him in some way, and therefore couldn't be allowed to play in this game any longer.

And he, if he had invented and set up the game, had done the best job of all on himself. What a lovely way of intentionally hiding something from yourself and the world—amnesia. And it looked as if he were the only one that was going to win the game. He couldn't imagine what the awards for such a game could possibly be.

In any event, he had to get out to Sleep-Tanks. What about the ledgers—should he take them with him or what? The hiding place behind a row of books was too obvious. There was really no foolproof place in or around the house he could hide them. Finally he hit on the idea of mailing them to himself out at Sleep-Tanks.

He didn't waste time looking for wrapping paper or a box, instead he tossed the ledgers into a small overnight grip to which was already attached a permanent address and mailing label. He took the solvent stick out of the handle and removed the old address on the label and with his pen wrote in the new address. In the postage pouch between the label he put what he judged to be more than enough money, then he slammed the grip into the package mailing chute. Several seconds later, there was a soft clang in the letter chute and he pulled out a small plastic tube containing a receipt along with his change. He memorised the receipt digit and flushed it down the toilet. People could be waiting at the bottom of the turned-off incinerator chute, but not very well the toilet.

He showered and creamed the stubble of whiskers off his face. Then he changed into a soft grey suit and walked out into the light of an Indian Summer smoky morning. The sun had a pumpkin ripeness to it that winter wouldn't long resist harvesting. In spite of dying leaves all around being carried to their funerals by the wind, Conrad whistled a snatch of tune he remembered a little girl in a park as having sung. He was sorry when the walk ended and he stepped into the drug-store-combination-everything-else. Inside the entrance he stopped and had the news teletype print a paper for him. Then he ambled over to a menu and dialled his order back to the kitchen. He glanced quickly through the paper.

David Kyle hadn't been part of any illusion. The write-up was brief, describing the body which had been discovered by someone

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passing the open door. There was no mention of any other murders, or of Laura, April, Niles, or Romulus and Remus, the two out-of-town legmen. Nor was there any further mention as to whether or not the authorities still considered his wife missing.

Reading again of how Kyle's head had gone through the t-v screen, reminded him irrelevantly that he ought to get new communication equipment put in *The Needle.* He crossed over the store to the t-v directories.

THE CRACK CRACK-UP BOYS
It's Not Us That's Cracked !
BUT YOU ! ! !
So Call Our Heliojet Doctors !
We Fix Anything
From a Loose Rivet
To a Loose Pilot !

The ridiculousness of the ad irritated him, but, nevertheless, he dialled the number listed below it and was answered by a sexy little minx obviously picked for her come-to-baby-do air.

He explained what he wanted. She connected him with the proper department and he made arrangements to have the necessary equipment brought over and installed in *The Needle.*

He went back to his waiting breakfast and ravenously devoured it. Over his third cup of coffee he skimmed down the front of the newssheet—which, he noticed on second glance, was nothing but a solid block of Moon Issue coverage.

Now that the Moon had become the major scientific research centre and jumping-off-place for interplanetary and interstellar flight, a strange scientific nationalism had evolved. It had quietly moved into a form of autonomy that wanted no further overseership from the cultural-political Unesco that permeated World Government. Cultural-political jurisdiction was fine for Earth, they argued, which was basically not a scientific body. But for the Moon which now was an entire scientific body, a unique scientific government was wanted. And since they were the scientists it was felt only they could form and apply it. The whole appeal had deeper underlying reasons.

The last three wars—though not their fault—were looked back upon by scientists as horrible examples of what might happen again if they allowed themselves to become emotionally involved with any form of World State Nationalism. Especially since intercourse with Earth's neighbours, both interplanetary and intersolar was about to begin.

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On the other hand the World Council and Unesco felt uneasy, even suspicious, of the whole Moon stand. Not because they couldn't see or sympathise with the altruism underlying the basic issues, but because a private enterprise was also involved—Trans-Lunar Spaceways.

Trans-Lunar was one of the last few remaining capitalistic corporations in the old-fashioned sense of the word. Somehow, just after the close of the Third World War, it got the jump on everybody including the World Government, arriving at the Moon first. Since then, their headstart and resources had managed to keep them technologically well out in front. Not only were they the sole space-line corporation, but also it was their money that was being poured into the huge interstellar star ship *Relativity*.

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Heretofore Trans-Lunar had remained neutral concerning all jurisdictional and political issues. But with no warning it had suddenly swung overnight to sympathy with the Lunar Autonomy Committee, offering it all available financial aid—aid the Committee wasn't likely to turn down, since the thing they lacked was sufficient financial independence to carry out their intended secession from Earth. Then, very soon, the day could come when the Moon might be exclusively controlled by Trans-Lunar Spaceways. And that was what Unesco was afraid of.

Conrad wadded up the paper and dropped it in his empty coffee cup. After pressing the release-button he stared unseeingly at his dishes being swept away to the kitchen, suddenly thinking of Alfred Drake. Trans-Lunar *was* Alfred Drake. He remembered Drake's party, being attacked by Roderik Niles, Drake's right-hand man, who was also Laura's brother—and April, too, had been at the party. They all knew Alfred Drake, except himself. What about the ledger on Drake ?

Conrad paid his bill, stretched once, stifling a yawn, and stood up. He felt completely relaxed—too relaxed, almost dopey mentally. Even the coffee wasn't taking effect. Before going out he bought a tube of sodium dexadrene tablets to relax his arterioles from the tiring hypertension of nervousness and to strengthen his heartbeat. He took an overdose of four and almost immediately felt the cobwebs being swept out of his brain by the increased flow of supercharged oxygenized blood.

He walked out into the hazy autumn light, and became aware of the voices created by the morning—birds twittering and winging their way south, men and women, sleek, healthy looking animals, laughing and chattering, climbing into jets, women in leisure shorts with the sun shining through their transparent bras as they walked towards the shopping centre. Colours and sounds of people that his preoccupation had made him unaware of.

He came to his house. A red heliojet was parked on the front lawn and on the roof two men were climbing out of *The Needle*, their arms loaded with smashed electronic equipment. The Crack-Up Boys hailed him and finished installing the new gear. He helped them cart the junk down to their ship, which had *Doctor Heliojet* printed all over it. They punched out the necessary amount from his credit card and flew off straight into the yellow sun.

He climbed the roof stairs and gave *The Needle* a once-over. Then he hopped inside and released the magnetic mooring grapples. Up in the air he turned the transparent nose towards Atlantic Highlands and Sleep-Tanks. The glittering canyons of steel and glass receded into the smoky light below him.

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He felt he was thinking clearly now. Who had spun the web—Alfred Drake or Val von Rachin? Or Alister Conrad? Who really were they trying to trap—Rene de Lamiter? A spider with a pet telepath like de Lamiter would be truly invincible. Trans-Lunar could then spin a web around the Moon, the Earth, and, some day, the stars. Was that the real thing Dr. von Rachin was afraid of—afraid that de Lamiter would fall into Drake's hands?

Conrad was von Rachin's pawn. Who was Drake's? Or was he, Conrad, just a catspaw placed between the two of them by his earlier self? The theory began to intrigue him. If Drake really was the other opponent trying to get to de Lamiter, then it would logically motivate many of the things that had been happening.

Perhaps his earlier self had cooked the whole thing up with Drake—with an operation to prevent his mind from being read by de Lamiter—only, afterwards, the operation to immunize his mind against being read had also given him amnesia. And von Rachin had got hold of him.

There was Hypo Ned, though; how could he be fitted in? Conrad was again struck by the weirdness of that whole interlude with Ned, and the things Ned said he, Conrad, had done. And his *own* retina pattern being permanently placed in his eyes! Before his amnesia, had he been off masquerading as somebody else? The whole incident was puzzling. As far as he knew and anybody else knew, retina patterns were the one thing that couldn't be changed. That was why they were used as positive identification. He realised that was a contradiction—he had just had his pattern changed. The longer he tried fitting Ned into place, the bigger became the holes in the fabric of his theories. Nothing was going to fit until the key piece—his earlier self—was found.

The glassite dome of Sleep-Tanks sparkled into view below him and he put *The Needle* into a shallow dive towards the south entrance.

But amnesia didn't prevent a lot of the smaller pieces from turning up. Kyle's tape on Laura and—de Lamiter?—waiting for him, pleased him. The thought of Marken waiting for him inside the safe-vault pleased him even more. He had even reconciled himself to the thought of using force if Marken wouldn't talk. Marken should turn out to be one of the puzzle's most informative pieces.

XI.

Conrad parked in the usual place and saw that Jameson was already waiting for him at the entrance. The grip containing the ledgers had arrived in the mailing chute and when Conrad repeated the memorized receipt serial number into the mouthpiece, Central Post office at Newark released it and it slid out of the chute. With identification

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established, Kyle's registered spool of tape was also released to him.

Conrad didn't feel like listening to the old man's chatter so he asked for the keys and headed for his office.

Once inside, he snapped on the lights and put the grip and tape into a closet, locking the door and putting the key inside his shoe. He left the draperies across the windows fully drawn. He discovered the office lock to be a double affair which could be locked with a key from the inside as well as outside—something he wished he had known before!

After throwing the ring of keys into a desk drawer he pulled out his stungun and made sure the battery was still sufficiently charged, then he picked up a heavy brass paperweight in case Marken needed coaxing. He glanced into the retina lock and the vault slid open. He stepped through.

Marken was gone.

He carefully walked around all four sides of the room. His heart was pounding and his body felt clammy. What did he think he was looking for—an invisible man? He examined the floor carefully where he thought he had put Marken. It was in front of the only blank wall space in the vault. There were no marks, no sign of bonds, broken or otherwise. For seconds he did a mental double-take on the invisibility angle. It would almost have to be something as impossible as that, unless he knew how to walk through walls. Or, in some manner, could he have got untied and opened the vault door?

Conrad located the mechanism that would close the vault from the inside. But above it was another retina lock, which meant that only he could again open it. As a check, Conrad closed the door. He was about to peer into the opening retina eyepiece when he felt a draft of air on his neck. He whirled, bringing up the stungun.

The wall against which he had propped Marken had partially vanished. In its place was a perfect square of blackness, a concealed automatic door. He spotted a flashlight on the large metal table against the opposite wall. He made sure it was working before cautiously stepping into the open wall.

A hidden passageway that automatically opened when the vault door was closed. He pointed the light into the darkness and down a flight of stairs. At the bottom lay Marken.

He must have fallen the night before when the passageway had opened removing his back support. His hands and feet were still tied, but his eyes were closed and his head lolled over at a grotesque angle.

Conrad took two of the steps at a time, hoping that Marken wasn't dead. At the bottom, his teeth went on edge as he examined him.

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Both his back and neck were broken. He bent down and placed his ear to his heart. It was still thudding, faintly and slowly. But the shock of moving him up the stairs or even touching him would be the finish. If he could only be brought around long enough to say something . . .

Conrad went back up the steps and opened the vault door. The passageway simultaneously closed. He went into the office and came back with a bottle of brandy, again closing the door. As it closed, the passageway opened and he went back down to Marken.

Very carefully he removed the gag and opened his lips and, to keep him from choking, trickled in the brandy. Marken coughed weakly and blinked his eyes. Conrad gently held down his head to keep him from trying to sit up. Marken finally opened his eyes but they already had the glassy stare of death lurking in them.

His lips opened and his voice was surprisingly steady when it came. "So you're still alive, and you want the—the answers . . . Since you won—and I didn't—I guess you're entitled to . . ."

A flash of pain twisted his face into a mask. He closed his eyes until it passed. When he opened them, death was staring out stronger than ever. "Your wife hired me to find out . . . where you had put somebody named de Lamiter . . . and if I accidentally killed you, so much the better—I'm going to—." Death dimmed his eyes before he could close them.

So it had been Laura, of all people—and not April. At the thought of April, he felt ill. He started to raise the brandy to his own lips, then stopped and gave the bottle a toss into the further darkness of the corridor and listened to it smash and tinkle into a hundred pieces.

Furiously he grabbed up the flash and started off down the corridor after the echoing ring of glass. He expected to find almost anything at the end. He made his way over the rough-hewn floor. Around and above him the roof and walls had been reinforced with a sprayed-on plastic the colour of fish-belly grey. The unpleasant dirty-whiteness made him think of Laura and April after death had entered them. He shielded the flashlight so only the darkness of the floor was reflected. Abruptly he came to the end of the corridor.

There was nothing—just rocks and tumbled earth. His light picked up bits of dried weed and leaves. He kicked open a clod of dirt—its centre was dark with moisture. Someone within the last week or two had sealed off the exit. Had his earlier self also done this? What had he used it for? To come and go unseen from his office and safe-vault during the time he was supposed to have been missing and dead? Probably. Then he must have destroyed the entrance location, knowing that once he contracted amnesia he would have no further use for

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it. He turned and walked back through the wormlike tube, checking his watch to time himself and the tunnel's distance. This time he literally hit a dead-end.

The beam from his flash picked up Marken lying twisted and broken at the bottom of the steps. Conrad glanced at the time. His walk back had taken nearly twenty minutes. That would place the tunnel entrance somewhere in the clump of woods west of Sleep-Tanks.

He stared down at Marken again. Marken had demonstrated that dying was the easiest thing in the world. Conrad hoped he could do it just as well when the time came. But what was he going to do with Marken's body? He would have to leave him here, at least for the time being.

He stepped over him and climbed back up into the safe-vault. After setting the flash down he opened the vault and walked tiredly out to his desk. He sat down and rested his head on his arms, relaxing. The strain was growing too great again. His only hope was to get his memory back, that hope was somehow cheering.

Kyle's tape! He got up and took the spool out of the closet, locking the door again and dropping the key back in his shoe. He fumbled around his desk until he found a player, then inserted the spool and turned it on.

"Kyle again . . . Been having trouble contacting you, hence this tape. A couple of my statistics' boys have been doing a little field work. Why didn't you tell me about this bird de Lamiter, or didn't you know. De Lamiter, it seems, appeared out of nowhere and made some kind of love to your wife. This was shortly after he had been to see you, where he apparently learned that Laura Conrad controlled your Refrigeration Corporation funds. But after his visit to her, you switched to Sleep-Tanks. Maybe I'm shooting in the dark, but how's that for a connection? And no matter how you look at it, he seems to've been the one who put the pressure on her for the financial support that caused the switch. And shortly after the switch he disappeared. Seems your wife was in love with him. Maybe you tried to kill her before your disappearance. So, maybe when you suddenly reappeared, she thought it was to take another crack at her—and she lammed.

"Hell, this is all a lost of theorising . . . but you get the idea. Incidentally, the leg-work boys tell me that in spite of her being on the run from this other party they're trying to keep up with, she's been trying to tail you occasionally as well. But try to get a lead for me on de Lamiter. I'm going to work on him next, just as soon as I get another angle out of the way . . . Cutting out now. And remember, the situation still isn't thirty."

Conrad let out his breath and relaxed down into the chair. No

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wonder Laura had thought it was he who was trying to kill her. She apparently hadn't known of his amnesia of if so, hadn't believed it real. Or later, perhaps, she had learned of it and had felt safe in tracking him to the safe-vault, knowing that he would never suspect her.

Laura's chronology of movement began slowly to straighten itself out in his mind. She must've followed him and waited, somehow knowing that sooner or later he would go to the safe-vault. What had she thought when it hadn't opened for him the first time! That must have upset her as much as it had him. Maybe she had decided then and there that it was a deliberate act on his part, that he had become suspicious of someone's presence. Too bad after dropping him she hadn't thought of the brilliant idea Marken had—that of lifting him up, opening his eyelids and pressing his face against the retina eyepiece. That gag probably didn't work once the just-freshly-dead stage was passed, otherwise Marken could have floored him back in the cubicle and dragged him feet-first over to the vault.

But why had she decided on somebody like Marken after he hadn't opened the safe-vault that first time? Perhaps because she had never fully believed the amnesia business, figuring it was just another come-on to lure her into the land-of-the-dead. That would also explain why she hadn't chanced a reconciliation, phony or otherwise. Besides, she must have known about the ledger or some kind of record on de Lamiter being kept in the vault, because her scheme had been simply and safely set for just that.

He hadn't realised it then, but not having his own retina pattern back had been a perfectly timed piece of luck. Maybe his first self had even planned it to happen that way. If so, then his present self had slightly unscrewed things by hiring Kyle. Kyle and his two hoods had been just enough to distract whoever was trying to kill Laura from killing her, at least at that time. No wonder she had found it so easy to keep track of him.

And from that point on the assassins—henchmen his earlier self had set up?—must have given her just enough trouble to prevent her from finding out if he actually had become suspicious of her and didn't have amnesia. So she had hired Marken. But who had killed April and Niles and Kyle? Probably the same assassins—having been instructed to do away with anyone who had the bad luck to become a witness to any of the skull-duggery.

In the meantime, Marken, whom Laura had engaged sometime earlier got in touch with her via Sleep-Tanks' t-v the minute he saw him set *The Needle* down in front of the south entrance. This was why Laura had been waiting out front when he dashed out after his in-and-out interlude in the safe-vault with Marken. And she had been expecting

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Marken, but instead saw him with the two ledgers under his arm and she had tried forcing down *The Needle* in one last effort to regain control of the situation. When that had failed she had followed him straight to Kyle's and, the two assassins had jumped out after her. They must have been lying in wait, knowing that he would come to Kyle's after seeing what had happened over the t-v. They also must have known that Laura, this time, would not be far behind.

More and more it was becoming clear that de Lamiter was the trapped fly that everyone had been racing after madly in the web. Conrad suddenly felt haunted—haunted by himself—and something else . . . Slowly he glanced around all four leather-panelled walls, then up over the padded ceiling and down to the lushly carpeted floor. A cloud of red began to waver before his mind's eye. He got up and crossed over to the windows. After flinging back the draperies he stared out at the dying autumn light filtering thinly through the glassite dome above.

Val von Rachin, he had almost forgotten about her. An alternating current started running through him—one moment he wanted to kill her, the next to make love to her. He wanted to destroy her—and there was no other way he could think of to break the de Lamiter compulsion.

He cut the thought off. He was deceiving himself. That wasn't the real reason she had to be destroyed—he was afraid of falling in love with her. The thought made him furious.

Dusk was sifting down from the darkening sky outside the dome when he finally succeeded in pushing von Rachin out of his conscious mind. A smile twisted across his face. In a negative sort of way he was feeling pleased with himself. After all the smoke of confusion and misdirection had cleared away it had taken one afternoon and a handful of words from a dying man to make the framework of the whole puzzle fit together. Now, all that remained were the pieces labelled—*where was de Lamiter—why was his earlier self hidden from his present self?*

Night was walking across the sky as he pulled closed the draperies. He stooped for the key in his shoe, then opened the closet and carried out the two ledgers. He placed them carefully on his desk and opened the one marked DE LAMITER.

XII.

Instead of being "speech-written," the page was covered with old-fashioned pen-and-ink longhand. The first thing Conrad spotted after de Lamiter's name was his retina number. He pulled out the paper slip from his wallet and checked to make sure they were the same. They were.

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Page after page of vital statistics detailing everything from bone structure to metabolic makeup filled the first half of the book. The notes ended suddenly in the middle of a page. The remaining pages were blank. Had he missed something? There was nothing in code. More slowly, this time, he carefully went through the statistics again. Surely Laura hadn't gone to such lengths just for a book on how de Lamiter was built. She probably knew! Again he turned to the final half-page. On first glance he had missed what was immediately under the last line—MARK I. He quietly closed the ledger. The production model in the vault! MARK I. De Lamiter.

He had found him. He felt the blood rush to his face in a flush of excitement. He had found him in the most logical and obvious place of all! The perfect place, where no one would find him.

He stood up and stared open the safe-vault door. He was inside before he noticed how hard his heart was pounding against his ribs. *Open the tank and kill de Lamiter.* There was tightness in his throat and mouth and a cracked record inside his head . . . *open the tank and kill de Lamiter.* Every time the record cracked a distorted picture like a wrinkled snapshot of red hair and blue eyes slid into his mind's eye . . . the colouring of von Rachin. And the satin-finished Sleep-Tank across from him misted blackly into a coffin.

The thought of opening the tank and killing de Lamiter built up such momentum that it sucked all thought away from both levels of his mind. A blankness as black as the coffin-shape filled it. He stopped at the control-end of the tank and placed an icy hand on the single control handle. He turned it clear around to OFF.

The top parted in the middle and slid silently down over the two sides. He held his breath as a blast of cold air hit him in the face. He caught an impression of spun-plastic that spider-webbed the air-foam interior before the full wave of the shock froze him.

The tank was empty.

Only the injection nozzles from the freezing compartment and muscle stimulation pads remained.

The discovery left Conrad's gasping mind as empty and cold as the tank. He couldn't bring his consciousness into focus. There seemed nothing left to focus on. The tank was empty. De Lamiter had vanished. Then slowly a terrible fear filled his mind. De Lamiter—with his incredible power—was somewhere at large, out there in the world. And he, Conrad, had been led on a goose chase of the wildest sort. De Lamiter had escaped or been let out before Val von Rachin had summoned him, judging from the blocked tunnel entrance-exit. Somebody had made his exit that way. Somebody who had no further use for the tunnel or for the sleep-tank. Who else but de Lamiter?

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How he had done it unaided, if he had, was one problem with which Conrad didn't want further to overtax his weakening powers of deduction. But *he* was the only one who *could* have let him out ! Nobody else was in a position to— Suddenly he began to see a possible pattern, and to realise what had happened to his identity . . .

Sometime after his accident in the wood, probably very shortly after, he must have come back here and entered the safe-vault through the tunnel. Then, for some completely incomprehensible reason, he must have let de Lamiter out of the sleep-tank. He couldn't imagine what then had transpired between himself and de Lamiter. But whatever it was it must have been the seed to this whole fantastic situation. Whatever he had talked de Lamiter into, de Lamiter must have agreed to. Or had it been the other way around ?

The thought terrified him. Here he was all alone and without a memory. Had he deliberately sacrificed his identity for some unimaginable reward—which would eventually come from de Lamiter, whom he had helped. Helped how ? And in what ? Had de Lamiter foreseen that the surgery would make his, Conrad's, mind unreadable? If he had, then he had also known that Conrad would be used as the bloodhound in tracking him down. Only Conrad could get into the vault. Only a Conrad innocent and unsuspecting, remembering nothing, would have opened it in search of de Lamiter. But again why had he wanted the authorities through Conrad to track him down to the place where he, Conrad, had already helped or aided him to escape from ? Why did de Lamiter want it known that he was loose again ? But what elaborate involved actions to plan ! Again, they might have also been serving other equally complex purposes—killing whole coveys of birds with a single stone.

But was he the stone—or one of the birds ?

Conrad suddenly shook himself and walked back into his office. He slumped into the air-bubble chair and stared vacantly at the Drake and de Lamiter ledgers in front of him. He lit a cigarette across the igniter on the bottom of the pack. He began to wonder what de Lamiter was up to and who he was and where he was. Maybe he wasn't even on Earth. He might be on the Moon getting things ready to take over. With plastic surgery and this new business of being able to change retina patterns he might be and could be anybody. God ! He might even be von Rachin . . .

Conrad laughed and watched his breath disintegrate the cigarette ash into dust. De Lamiter was in a position to do that very thing to Earth, if he still hated it enough. Disintegrate it into dust—and from the Moon. And then when the giant starship *Relativity* was ready, leave forever—leave for the planets.

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Conrad lit another cigarette and let it smoulder away into the air. As he sat staring into the smoke-wisps he was aware that ever since discovering de Lamiter gone, which seemed ages ago, he had hated the man with an intensity that now seemed to make his very heart tremble. Part of this hate, he felt, must be from unconscious memory; the rest planted in him by von Rachin. He realised now what she had meant about the danger of unpredictables like de Lamiter. Still, it wasn't his fault that he had reached the end of the rope and there was nothing to tie it to. But now he would have to tell her about it.

His heart was pounding again and his hand trembled slightly as he switched on the t-v. After the operator gave him Unesco, he went through miles of red tape for the longest ten minutes he could remember.

"*Alister Conrad*?" someone asked again.

They must have been alerted for his name because there was a muffled apology and the screen was connected and reconnected through several series of light and darknesses until it lit up, revealing the sanctum sanctorum of Dr. Val von Rachin.

"Alister Conrad?"

Conrad stared disappointedly at a small man with a head as bald and almost as little as a billiard ball. However, the man's face was bright and shiny and there was no hesitation or veiled nuances in his manner.

"I'm Doctor von Rachin's chief secretary. She is not contactable at the moment—she has gone to the Moon. There will be no Earth-moon radio for another month, not until the Hermes Magnetic Power Project stops jamming the ionosphere." He paused, then went hurriedly on. "I trust you can go there all right? I'm sorry but those are her instructions—"

For an answer, Conrad cut the connection. He could feel his nerves twitching the muscles of his face. He tried to slow down the flow of adrenalin by closing his eyes. Always the unexpected—no matter what he prepared himself for! But the thing to do now was to get out of Sleep-Tanks once and forever. He gathered up the two ledgers and walked out into the outer darkness of the corridor.

Outside, the filtered night lay over the grounds like a blanket of black snow. It was just as dark above the dome. The stars had all vanished. A strange jitteriness had taken hold of him that he had never experienced before. Maybe it was because he couldn't see the Moon—where *she* was. Yet, all his energies were drawing together for some tremendous effort or purpose. He felt even more shaky as he realised that these were sensitive danger signs that something was about to happen. But everything was deathly still and there were no moving shadows, only his own muffled tread and quick breathing.

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Up till now de Lamiter must have been watching him mentally. That was probably also the explanation of the skillful removal of his wife and all the other complicating human factors which had stood in the way of something or other, perhaps the removal of anyone who might find out de Lamiter was loose. He suddenly thought of Ned. Was Hypo Ned one of de Lamiter's group? For a group de Lamiter undoubtedly had. All the complex puzzles couldn't have been manipulated solely by the telepath.

The whole still didn't make much sense to him, but maybe it did to someone like de Lamiter who was almost a superman. But the most chilling part was that Conrad felt that he was finished. He had run out of obvious things to do—things which could have been predicted and planned. And he was no longer a pawn in the game. He was expendable now. To hang around any longer would be getting in the way, offering himself as a target.

Nothing must stop him from getting to the Moon. For once he was in a position of knowing more than von Rachin did. But perhaps it didn't matter after all to de Lamiter whether he ever got there. But things had become so serious that she had gone to the Moon . . . And what about Alfred Drake? What was he doing in the picture? And why was there a Sleep-Tank ledger on him?

He was walking across the grounds and nearing the entrance when suddenly the bottom dropped out of Conrad's thoughts and his nerves twanged together like harp-strings.

The south entrance loomed ahead of him—through the clear wall he could see his jet—but there were now other jets next to his. Already a handful of men were through the entrance and coming toward him. He stopped, and they saw him.

Conrad barely waited to see them spread out and start running in his direction before he turned and dived around the corner of a warehouse. This was it, he thought. They had come for him. He stood shaking and storing up lungfuls of oxygen, then he was running for the opposite entrance. He looked back once and noticed that the huge bulk of the warehouse was still between him and his pursuers.

He was through the north entrance and into the deeper darkness beyond before they saw where he had gone. He didn't look back again, but continued to crash through the underbrush and scrub-oak, even after his lungs stopped adequately supplying him with oxygen. His ears were ringing and blackness kept rising over his vision. The lightness in his brain gave him the impression that he was flying—until he hit a rock. He felt his face and shoulders go tearing through briar-like bushes down into an almost bottomless hollow . . .

His teeth were biting into moist earth when he came to. His whole

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body felt as if it had been shaken by some gigantic dog. He tried to close his mouth, and became aware of the sharp stone scraping against the bone of his forehead. After several tries he opened his eyes. They had been stuck together with coagulating blood. He managed to twist over on his back and into a sitting position. It was still dark and there wasn't a sound. He sat there, his mind a blank, breathing in the night air and listening to the throb in his head.

The log just above his line of vision was an even blacker smear across the outer blackness. It had probably saved his life. The hollow into which he had fallen was so camouflaged with bushes that nobody could have seen him, even if they had passed right over his head.

A faint curtain of grey dawn was beginning to rise in the east before he felt steady enough to climb out of his hole and look around. He crouched on the ground, listening . . . Eventually he stood up—nobody took a shot at him. He picked up the ledgers from where he had dropped them, then slowly and quietly wound his way in and out of the scrub-oak and tumbled shrubbery until he caught the shining blackness of Sandy Hook Inlet. Silhouetted against this, the oval dome of Sleep-Tanks looked like a black, lustreless half-marble.

All was quiet, so he cautiously made his way around the western side of the enclosure, hesitating as he approached the street fronting the south entrance. The other jets were gone. Only his remained. He had a small battle with himself, deciding whether anyone would be lying in wait for him there.

The night was still heavy enough to offer him some protection. Besides, he would instantly see anybody if he stepped out silhouetted against the dawn. His heart pounded, his head was throbbing, and his vision was jumping and blurring, but he started out. Twenty more yards and one lunge would put him into *The Needle.* He was almost there when one of the ledgers slipped and hit the sidewalk with a loud slap.

In one breathless dash he made the far side of the jet, expecting to be dead before he got there. Again there was only silence and the pale dawn beginning to rise up the sky. Nobody was inside the entrance. Should he go in and see how Jameson had fared? There was no light on in the cubicle.

Instead he went back and retrieved the ledger, then quickly climbed into *The Needle* and ignited the jets. They caught on the first jab of the stud and the rotors yanked him up into the early morning air. The tail jet coughed out into full power and he headed east for the open Atlantic. And then it came—as he knew it must come.

All this time they had been waiting up here for him. They even allowed him to get another hundred feet out of the overcast before

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pouncing upon him. He didn't have time to duck back down. There was a tearing explosion and his tailpipe and rotors went whining off into the greying darkness. The air screamed as the fuselage-pod pummelled down through it and into the murky overcast.

The altimeter went spinning from 6,000 to 3,000 before he got the jacket of the ribbon-chute unzippered from his seat-back. He struggled into it and dived out into nothingness, pulling up the chest zipper as he went.

He yanked the cord and heard the chute ribbons rustle out into the slipstream. The remains of *The Needle* went whining on down below him. Then the chute caught, gently suspending him from his shoulders. Silently he drifted through the grey-black overcast. Eternities seemed to pass and he began to have the impression that he was hanging in Limbo.

Finally he dropped out of the overcast and into a cold dawn. The leaden wetness of the sea stretched below him to the horizon. He twisted and saw that Staten Island was behind him. Right below him was the smashed fuselage-pod of *The Needle.* It was insulated and would probably float for hours.

He grasped a handful of cords and spilled air to the left until he was on the far side of the pod. When he estimated he was twenty feet above the water, he unzipped the jacket, raised his arms over his head and slipped out of the chute. He hit the water feet-first and went under with a gasp. The icy brine nearly froze him before he reached the surface.

Breathing hard, he moved out of the way of the chute and swam the remaining distance to the pod. He boosted himself into the still open door, being careful to keep the pod from capsizing, then waited for the tide to drift him onto the island's South Beach.

He had forgotten all about the two ledgers—they were lying on the floor of the pod. Apparently they were destined to remain his.

XIII.

By the time he located a cab service in St. George at the north end of the island, his clothes were almost dry. It was a dreary morning with no sign of the sun. He was about ready to drop with weariness, and somewhere along the line he had lost the sole of his right shoe. His wallet and credit card, fortunately, were still intact.

He picked out a sleepy looking pilot and slipped into the back of his aircab. Ten minutes later, Conrad paid him off at the service end of Sky Terrace and cautiously walked toward his house. It was still early, only a little after seven, so there wasn't much chance of his meet-

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ing anybody. The grounds and front of the house looked quiet and undisturbed. The feeling of security slowly returned. He activated the lock and stepped into his living-room. Silence as restful as a warm sea greeted him. He headed straight for the bedroom where he paused only long enough to remove his clothes before collapsing into bed.

He must have fallen asleep immediately, because the next thing he was aware of was waking up out of some kind of dream. His face felt damp and he was limp with exhaustion. Something had frightened him. Yet, according to his watch, only minutes had elapsed since he had entered the bedroom. He glanced around. The ledgers were still there on the chair by his pillow. He glanced in the opposite direction and saw that his closets were open.

Someone had taken his other pair of shoes and his only fresh suit ! He jumped out of bed and almost stumbled over his soggy suit and shoes on his way across to the closets. Why would anyone want to steal his clothing ?

He made as fast a tour of the rest of the rooms as his weary body would allow. Everything else seemed in order, although he never had found the time from all his crazy patchwork of problems to give the place a thorough inventory. Now, he couldn't tell for sure what was missing and what wasn't. Except for his clothing. Whoever had done it, must have got in through the French windows in the rear. Would he return for anything else ?

He was standing in the living room when he suddenly noticed a faint blinking glow coming from under the t-v screen. It was the tape secretary light, but the signal was blinking defectively. It flickered several more times then went completely out. He reached over and cut in the message tape, wondering how long the recorder had been trying to get his attention. April's voice :

" Al—oh, God, Al ! Why aren't you home ! Niles is here . . . he's found out something—we've found out something. Laura is still trying to kill you—it's because she failed that first time ! She tried to kill you in the woods—you didn't have an accident ! The reason she did it was—wait I'm cutting off—there's something wrong—"

There was a click, then silence. The playback cut off.

And that was when and where she had died, Conrad thought. Beside the t-v set. And the things he had thought about her had been all wrong.

A dozen whys suddenly crowded out the sickness and remorse he was beginning to feel. He stared a little wildly around the room—everything seemed out of focus. Somewhere within his grasp he must have the solution to himself. But it seemed hidden by the frantic necessity of having to find it. He dragged himself back into the bedroom and collapsed.

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But he couldn't get back to sleep. After tossing and turning a while longer, he decided it was because he was out in the open where anybody coming in again would be sure to spot him asleep. He stumbled up out of bed again, gathered up his crumpled clothing, the ledgers, then stuffed them all under the bed and crawled in after them. The bedspread reached to the floor, and nobody looked under beds any more—not even old maids, if there were any left, he told himself. Sleep, like tons of sand, fell on him.

It was late afternoon when he crawled out from under the bed. He was stiff and sore and his stomach felt like a hole full of acid. He stood up and shook his head to clear away the sleep fumes. The room hadn't undergone any further change during his sleep. He circled through the rest of the house on his way to the bathroom. Everything was as he had last seen it.

He leaned over the basin and stared at his strained and haggard face. It was ghastly. The ocean had washed off most of the blood and dirt, but in some curious fashion had left him the face of an old man. He washed his face and wiped away the whiskers with what was left of the depilatory. Then he removed his shorts, sprayed himself all over with soap and stepped into the needle-spray.

He switched on the ultra-violet along with the air-dryer and felt his skin grow taut and warm. He carefully combed his hair before staring at himself again. Except for several deep lines around his eyes and mouth, which would now probably be with him forever, he looked like just a slightly older edition of his earlier self. He applied the final touch by picking up the tooth hose and spraying his teeth with the polishing gas. His teeth sparkled back at him from the mirror. Then his whole body froze. Someone else was also in the mirror—a smooth-looking man with eyes like black marbles. Conrad whirled and a gun showed in the man's hand.

"So you're one of these nine-lives people," the man sneered. "Just walked right out of the sea, huh? Well, you'll be going right back there, only—this time—full of lead sinkers. We're through looking after you—freak!"

Conrad noticed the gun was the obsolete projectile type. His palms started to sweat. He still had the nozzle of the tooth hose grasped in his right hand. Not more than five feet separated them.

The man's marble eyes began to turn. "He'll be coming back pretty soon and you're to be out of here once and for—"

Conrad let him have it with the gas from the now wide-open nozzle—right in the eyes. Then he lunged for him, but slipped on the water-splashed floor. The gun roared just as his feet went out from under him. The air was still echoing from the explosion as Conrad twisted

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around and yanked the man off his feet. He fired again just before he went down, but his aim was bad. The abrasive gas had nearly blinded him. Glass from the mirror spattered them.

Grunting and coughing, they rolled around in the shattered glass until Conrad ripped tendons of the man's gun-wrist against a jagged chunk of glass. Then he pulled the gun away from the limp hand and brought it crashing down over the man's skull.

Conrad waited until he got his breath back before standing up. His body was bleeding from dozens of tiny cuts. The man was right. He would have to get out of here once and for all. No telling who would come barging in next. There might even be somebody waiting outside now. But he decided to chance five or ten minutes showering the blood off and germiciding himself with the ultra-violet.

After this was done, he ducked into the bedroom and got into his battered clothes and shoes with the sole missing. Grasping the old-fashioned gun he went over to the open French windows and looked out. Nobody on the sun-deck. Only the gadget to open the windows without the alarm going off. Dangling over the roof-edge was a rope ladder. Still holding the gun ready in his hand, he slowly climbed up the ladder and peered over the roof. Nothing but an empty jet

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parked in the mooring grapples. He went over to the jet and climbed in, then hopped it down to the front door. He went back into the house and cleaned up the bathroom. He went to the sun-deck, flipping down the ladder and throwing the alarm gadget over into the street far below. Then he carefully shut the French windows and took the ledgers out to the jet. After that, he went back and carried out Marble Eyes.

It wasn't until he was in the air that he began to tremble. Death was getting closer and closer to him. He wasn't quite sure how many of his nine lives he still had left. He held the gun in his lap and kept his head half-turned, alert for the first sign of motion in the unconscious man beside him. When he came to, there was going to be one hell of a thorough inquisition. "He'll be coming back pretty soon," the man had said. Who? And why was it so important that he should be killed?

Far out over Long Island Conrad locked the controls then, while waiting for the man to come to, went through his pockets. There was nothing but a wallet with some currency and a limited credit card with the name John Smith on it. Conrad threw them down beside the fictitious Smith. Probably just an all-around muscle man—only one of the many dirty-work men in de Lamiter's no doubt expanding organization.

The sun had been down for a half-hour, but there was still no sign of Smith returning to consciousness. Conrad for the dozenth time slapped his face. Not even an eyelid flickered. He stuck his hand inside Smith's shirt. It was like touching ice—and there was no heart murmur! Smith was dead. He had hit him too hard, and sometime between then and now he had died.

There was nothing to do now but dump him somewhere. He angled down the sky to a secluded section of Long Island and left Smith propped up against a tree.

Back in the sky he clicked on the t-v and had the operator give him Trans-Lunar Spaceways. Information told him that the next compatible Moon-angle wouldn't be until four the next morning. The ship was the *Willy Ley* and it would leave *perigee* from Montauk Point, Long Island. Conrad gave an assumed name, Elliott Halstead, made a reservation, and headed back to the city.

There was an uptown airpark he had spotted the day before where he could get a meal without stepping out of the jet. He crossed up and over Manhattan, until he was directly above The Jet Spokes, as it was labelled. On an elevated ramp there were five neon-lit glass hubs. Connected to each, were twenty-five chromium spokes which fanned out ten or twelve feet into a perfect circle. Most of the spokes had some kind of jet parked at the end.

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He waited for the traffic pattern to change, then dropped Smith's jet down to a spoke with a vacant end. He lowered his window and anchored one end of the flexible conveyor-belt to the opening, then asked into the mike for a menu. This slid out onto the stationary tray at the end of the belt.

He settled on Spanish rice with shrimps and a salad. Also three cups of coffee. A voice yelled the price out of the two-way mike. Conrad had enough loose change to cover it, so he poured it into the menu pocket and clipped it to the returning side of the belt. He found cigarettes in the glove compartment.

He ate, smoked and sipped the remainder of the coffee, for once thinking or worrying about nothing. It looked as if he would make it to the Moon after all, in spite of de Lamiter.

His eye fell on the two ledgers still with him on the seat. He picked up Drake's and thumbed idly through it. The location of Drake's sleep-tank was given as some place on the South Shore of Long Island. Probably his summer place or hideaway. As he continued to leaf through the ledger, something about it struck him as faintly familiar—as if he had seen it all before. He picked up the de Lamiter ledger and cracked it open, then sat comparing it with Drake's, page for page. The vital statistics were almost identical. Height, weight, general body structure, even colouring. There was no record that Drake had ever used it. He had only bought it.

His comparisons were brought to an abrupt halt when, for no reason, the t-v lit up. A head and voice appeared. "Wetzel! Wetzel! Where in hell have—" The man's eyes suddenly focused on Conrad's startled face. Faint but amazed recognition started to spread over his features.

Conrad lunged out and snapped off the screen. He *was* in hot water now. They would have a net out for him immediately. He realised that in getting the cigarettes out of the glove compartment he must have accidentally switched on the receiving end of the t-v.

A dozen plans for ditching the jet crossed his mind. He couldn't leave it here, because there was no place to walk to or hail a cab from. Besides, there was a neon saying "Do Not Step Out of Jets." He didn't waste any more time deliberating. Instead, he jumped the jet into the air and started hunting for a good-sized parking ramp. He would dump it there, then do some double changing of taxis until he was out of the danger area.

He finally found a suitable place and sat it down. He snatched the stub from an attendant, threw him money and rushed down the ramp to the end. The third cab he hailed swooped down and he got in. After riding several blocks he got out and did this with four more taxis, until he was far down and across town.

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He asked the last pilot if he knew of a clothing store in the vicinity that would still be open. The pilot did, and a moment later let him out at a moderately priced looking place.

Conrad went in and bought a pair of dark brogues with foam soles, a navy-blue, wrap-around shawl suit, and a high-collared tunic shirt. Also socks and underwear and a weather coat made of a dull plastic that absorbed nearly all light—just the thing for being inconspicuous.

The automatic alterations machine in the dressing booth gave him a perfect fit in about two minutes.

He was nervous as he handed his credit card to the salesman, but after checking procedure it was handed back to him without any suspicious looks. He started to walk out of the store, then almost jumped when the salesman called him. It was only in reference to his old clothes, which Conrad told him to throw down the incinerator chute

Three more changes of cab brought him down to the lower end of the island and, he suddenly realised, quite close to Alfred Drake's—who had bought a Sleep-Tank. Had he ever used it? Another much more devastating realisation swept through him. *He had forgotten to take the ledgers and revolver out of Smith's jet.*

Hell, why not call on Mr. Drake anyway! He didn't quite know just how his relationship, if there had even been any, now stood with him. It might be interesting to find out, interesting and perhaps even deadly. However, he would chance that. Besides, for some time now, he had been intending to find out just what sort of man Drake was, and if he really was part of the plot or just an innocent bystander. It might even be a good thing to come right out and explain about the two ledgers. There would certainly be a positive or negative reaction to that—one that would be hard to mask.

He looked at his watch. A little after nine. Drake's would be as good a place as any to sit out some time before going out to the space field.

XIV.

Conrad had to wait fifteen minutes for a cab. He used the time in remembering Drake's address. The pilot let out a sharp whistle when Conrad gave it to him.

The cab let him out in front of the main entrance. Conrad had enough change left over from the credit card to give the pilot a tip worthy of his whistle. The whir of the rotors died away, leaving a silence so heavy that even the chirring of the crickets seemed a part of it. Two miniature spaceships flanked either side of the door facade. Bluish shafts of light flaring from their tails lit the short walk and steps.

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He now saw that this was not the entrance he had used the previous time when he had met April here. That had probably been a side entrance. Except for a faint bluish reflection picked up by the cloud-glass windows, the house looked completely dark and deserted. He pushed the t-v call button.

Eventually the screen flickered into life with the picture of an elderly Man-Friday. "Whom do you wish—oh, good evening, Mr. Conrad. I'll be right down."

Conrad grunted something and lit the last of Smith's cigarettes while waiting for the door to open. In the past, apparently, he had been a frequent caller.

The man opened the door and stepped aside for Conrad to enter. His uniform consisted of creaseless slacks and a V-zippered silver tunic.

"Again, good evening, sir." His voice matched his silvery hair and tunic. "In what way may I be of service?"

Conrad tried to keep his voice as mellow. "I would like to see Alfred Drake."

"But Mr. Drake is away on the Moon, sir."

"So soon? I was just here at a party he gave the other night."

"As surely you must know, sir, Mr. Drake's parties continue whether business calls him away or not."

"How long has he been gone?"

"Pardon, sir, but you should know that. You were with him when he left. That was a week ago."

Conrad began feeling depressed again with complications. And he was starting to get the fishy eye. He edged his voice with a certain toughness and impatience.

"How could I have? Don't you read the papers? It's been only four days since I wandered back into civilization from a—hunting accident. Besides, although they didn't mention it, I contracted a touch of amnesia."

The man shrugged as if he were used to complex paradoxical explanations and situations. But his manner became cold. "Just as you say Perhaps you would care to talk to Mr. Ackerman, his secretary. He's here, going over some corporation papers."

Conrad nodded and followed the silver jacket and hair down the hall and into a small lift. They stepped out of the third floor and crossed over to a heavy black door studded with miniature spaceships—apparently the emblem of Trans-Lunar.

The man knocked softly, then opened the door. "Mr. Acker—" He didn't finish. Mr. Ackerman was lying on the floor behind the desk with two feet sticking out.

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They rushed over to him. He was on his back and his face looked as if he had been stungunned. There was also a slug imbedded somewhere in his groin. Blood was still slowly oozing out. He was still warm, but dead.

Finally Conrad said, " I don't remember your name ?"

Nearly all of the man's aplomb was gone, but he replied in a steady voice. " Walton, sir. I think I had better notify the police."

" Not so fast. He's still warm. Don't tell me you haven't any ideas on this ?"

" Just before you arrived, two gentlemen who gave their names as Fax and Moxel, called and insisted they see—" he glanced down at the dead man—" him concerning; they said, ' a life and death matter'."

Conrad looked up from Ackerman. " They weren't lying about that. What happened to them ?"

" They left almost immediately."

" Why do you suppose they wanted him dead ?"

" Well, sir, Mr. Ackerman handled all of Mr. Drake's private affairs and, as a rule, knew all of his secret business as well. I imagine those men knew that Ackerman had information which might be dangerous to them or their employers if Mr. Drake found out about it."

Or if he, Conrad, found out about it, thought Conrad. So, already they must have found Smith's jet and the two ledgers. Then they had rushed down here on the off-chance that he might come enquiring after some dangerous piece of information. However, they must have estimated that his odds of coming here were very slim, or they would have waited for him. But already something was starting to chew at the back of Conrad's mind.

" How did you know I was supposed to have seen Drake off a week ago ?"

" I was summoned by Mr. Ackerman at the tail-end of a t-v conversation he had been having with Mr. Drake from Babylon."

" Babylon ?"

" Babylon, Long Island, sir. He has a summer and weekend residence out there which he also uses when he's transacting anything of a—well, highly confidential nature. "

" Where do I come in ?" Conrad was becoming impatient.

" I happened to glance at the screen as I entered the study here, and saw you pass in the background behind Mr. Drake."

Conrad looked at the screen, a massive affair directly behind Ackerman's desk. " Could you have been seen entering the room from the other end ?"

" I hardly think so. The t-v is adjusted to pick up only the immediate vicinity of Mr. Ackerman's desk. And I waited inside the doorway

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until the conversation was over, which was almost immediately because I cleared my throat and Mr. Ackerman cut off. The conversation, as I had suspected had been a highly secretive one."

"What had Ackerman summoned you for?"

"To inform me that Mr. Drake was leaving right away for the Moon and might be gone indefinitely, and to send over his clothing by messenger. Mr. Drake never kept more than a suit or two out at Babylon."

"Who's out at Babylon now—anybody?"

"The servants have all been recalled for the winter. Usually there is a caretaker who stays through the winter, but he disappeared the day Mr. Drake left for the Moon. Whether a new one has been engaged or not, I don't know."

Conrad saw that he was getting no place fast. Walton didn't know a thing. If he had, they would have killed him too.

"Well, you might as well call in the authorities." Conrad held out his wrist. It was just going on eleven. "I hate leaving you to face the music alone, but it can't be helped. I've got to get some place in a hurry."

"I understand. Shall I tell them you were here?"

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" I would appreciate it if you wouldn't. Do you think Drake would object to my borrowing one of his jets—that is, if there's one around to spare?"

" I'm sure he would be only too happy to loan you one. I'll escort you to the roof garage."

They stepped back into the lift and shot up two more floors to the roof. A heavy overcast had rolled in again from the sea and the clear coldness of early evening had disappeared. It was a quiet night with only a faint whisper of wind in the air.

Automatic eyes opened the hangar doors and lit up the row of shining jets inside. Walton told him to take his pick, so he climbed into the first in line. The keys were already in the ignition—he switched them on and simultaneously the hangar roof slid back. He nodded to Walton, then ignited the rotors and jumped the ship into the air.

He left the weather ultra-sonic area behind him and plunged into the overcast at its natural height. The navigational equipment was more elaborate than had been in *The Needle*. After some puzzling over the gear, he discovered that all he had to do was say, " Babylon," into a destination mike and automatically he beamed to Babylon.

He arrived several minutes later, the jet hovering while a map of the town flashed onto a ceiling screen. He dropped down to the one and only parking ramp and asked the attendant the whereabouts of the Drake place. It was on Sea Drift Road running into Great South Bay.

When Conrad got there he discovered it was the only mansion on Sea Drift Road. There was a high grill-work fence around the grounds boxing a square of darker darkness. He didn't set down outside the fence, but snapped on the landing lights and settled on the front lawn. He took a hand flash out of the seat pocket and started to prowl the grounds.

The caretaker's cottage was inside the fence just off the road. Conrad smashed a window with a flash, chancing that it wasn't alarm-wired into town as no doubt was the main house. He crawled through and after some hunting, found the power lead-ins. They ran in high from outside, connecting on the opposite wall with line meters, then down through the floor and probably underground to the main house.

On the rear porch he found an aluminium-handled axe, which he insulated with some sponge-rubber stripping from the only chair. He stood as far back from the wires as the handle would allow, then swung it down in a slicing arc. The wires parted with a dazzling crackle of blue sparks. He picked up the flash, switched it back on and saw that the still smoking ends had come to rest safely away from the floor and wall. He left them dangling and headed for the house.

A storm was rumbling somewhere off in the east. And rain, as well as the sea, was in a heavy wind blowing up from Great South Bay.

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The blackness had become so thick that the flash beam stabbed through it like a miniature sun.

The mansion, an old-fashioned affair, loomed up in the flash beam like some unknown monster. He climbed onto the massive veranda for a closer look at the main door. A retinal lock was installed. He circled the entire house on the veranda—every door was retina locked. He decided to cut short what was apparently going to be a long story by trying the windows. But he couldn't even get at the windows. Heavy wrought-iron shutters solidly fastened from the inside covered every window.

He finally stepped off the veranda and began searching the visible portion of the foundation for a basement or cellar window. He found one in the rear. After bashing in the glass he took his foot and went to work on the cross-frames. The flash revealed a twelve-foot drop to the basement floor. For padding he threw down his weather coat and his suit coat. He tried to squeeze through the narrow opening feet first, but his chest stuck.

He went back to the cottage for the axe.

After chopping out the lower casing, he got through and hit his pile of clothing with a jarring thump. When his wind returned and his feet stopped singing, he picked up the flash and got up.

The basement was like a mausoleum—concrete pillars every fifteen feet. The air, damp and cold, seemed held together with cobwebs. They clung to his face and hands like threads of wet taffy.

Doing his best to protect his face, he zigzagged through the mazelike pillar arrangement until he was at what he judged to be the basement's northeast corner. Sure enough, there was the opening—a three-foot crevice created by a dummy wall. Soon, now, he would be at what

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might be the key to everything—though, really, the ledger on Drake with its diagram of the tank's exact location had been the key to what he hoped was going to be *the* key.

He pointed the flash into it and down steps spoking out from a steel pole, then spiraling into darkness. Holding onto a thin tube of railing he went circling down the steps to the bottom, then through an obstacle course of radiation shields. The crypt seemed to be everything-proof.

At last he stood in front of the sleep-tank—Drake's private little escape-from-it-all, in case he ever needed an escape. But Drake, right now, was supposed to be far away from it all—on the Moon. Conrad grasped the control handle, feeling the vague hunch he had about Drake growing stronger. He gave the handle a twist and the top rolled back.

He was staring down at a naked man with freezing tubes connected to his body cavities. He was well preserved, middle-aged and handsome, with a powerful and sensual face curved like a satyr's. It was the same facial structure that Drake was supposed to have. Conrad remembered the description in the ledger—the man, without a doubt, was Drake.

The icy air radiating up from the body chilled Conrad's face and hands. Inside the lid, on a small control board, a tiny warning flashed on and off telling him not to leave the lid open more than ten minutes at a time. Underneath it, a dial was set for one hundred years. Beside it was a pulled-out restoration switch governed automatically by the duration dial. One hundred years before it would pop in. There was another restoration switch next to it, a manual one. Conrad threw it in.

The muscle stimulators unfolded and went to work over the rigid body before the freezing tubes had a chance to fully withdraw. A warm wave of moist air rolled out of the compartment. An injection cone of some sort was clamped down over the mouth and nose.

Five minutes went by and the cone and stimulators disappeared into the sides of the tank.

The flow of warm air had stopped, but still Drake didn't move. His eyes remained closed and his face and body looked as white and rigid as before. Conrad bent down over him.

He was dead.

How much had Ackerman known or suspected, he wondered? Or had he possibly been in on it too? No matter now. He had found out what he had wanted to find out, in spite of Ackerman's death.

He closed the lid of the tank, wiped his fingerprints off everything, and walked across the shielded crypt to the spiral stairway.

After making his way back through the maze of pillars, he pyramided

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old packing crates under the basement window, then again put on his dust-covered clothing and climbed through.

Outside, the blackness seemed to have increased even more. And the rain was heavy. He almost dreaded crossing over the dark wind-swept space to his jet. He had the uneasy feeling that the wind pouring out of the darkness was, for some reason, trying to blow out his flash beam. Now that the end was in sight there no longer seemed to be anything holding his nerve together. And the big jump to the Moon was coming up.

Lightning split open the sky and thunder crashed through, shaking the night into aftermaths of deadly silence. Only the split-splat of the rain on his face remained. Somehow he made out the time on his watch: It was after three. He started running. His whole body felt stiff and sore with tension.

In the air he connected the jet to a direct beam from Montauk Point, then tried to relax. But trying only increased his tension. He began to shake. The heater was on full blast, drying his pants and shoes, and there was sweat under his arms and on his forehead—but still he shook from some inner coldness.

The beautiful Dr. von Rachin was on the Moon with the deadliest man alive. And she thought he was *Alfred Drake*. So did the rest of the world. And they always would, because, no matter what the impersonation, de Lamiter's telepathic powers would make his behaviour exactly what people expected of the man he was supposed to be By alternating, he could even be several people at once. Only the physical limitations of makeup would stand in his way.

And he was taking over the Moon, which meant Earth as well.

Von Rachin would never be able to stop him and she would never understand why.

Even de Lamiter's own rough-and-tumble helpers here on Earth probably didn't have the vaguest idea what was going on. More money and more orders, and perhaps psychological conditioning, were the only things necessary for their functionings.

But who had actually disposed of Drake? Himself—or de Lamiter disguised as himself? There was still that awful gap in his own past to be filled in.

And now de Lamiter, as Drake, had gone in conquest of the Moon, revolt and all. The remaining details on Earth had been left to the clean-up boys to take care of. They had done a good job—he was the only detail that remained. He suddenly began to wonder about Ned. Either he had been in with de Lamiter all along, or, like everyone else, had been used by de Lamiter without knowing it—as in his, Conrad's, own case.

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But what about Drake? After being killed, why had his body been stuffed into the sleep-tank? Probably because it was as good a place as any to get him temporarily out of the way. It really didn't matter—as long as he was believed to be on the Moon. Ackerman had probably been the only one, outside of his earlier self and de Lamiter's henchmen, who had known about the tank anyway. Of one thing, however, he was certain: April, Niles, and the others were in no way connected with his or anyone else's schemes. They had been innocent bystanders. De Lamiter had found it necessary to remove them because of their linkage with his,-Conrad's, past.

What a complex monstrosity of a plan de Lamiter was carrying off? And how easy it would be for him to patch holes and cancel suspicions with his mind-reading ability—all minds but one. His!

The tremor of a new kind of excitement ran through him, and his shaking stopped. If he could get to the Moon in one piece—de Lamiter would be finished. Now, for the first time, he, Conrad, was holding all the strings. De Lamiter not only wasn't expecting him, thinking him dead, but de Lamiter could not read his mind—out of all the billions and billions of people. He was the only one who could get close enough to kill him! And he was on his way *now* to do it.

And no one knew. No one in the whole universe knew!

Suddenly he found himself laughing. Laughter rolled out of him in great sinking waves. The cabin became choked with sound. He was on the offensive at last! At last he had cut loose all the strings trying to make him a puppet!

His ears, as well as the cabin and his voice rang with laughter. Laughter bounced and rolled and exploded down deep inside him. He couldn't stop laughing—he couldn't get his breath—everything was ringing and darkening—somewhere he seemed to hear a voice . . .

"Montauk Point, Trans-Lunar Space Field, Sir . . . Shall we circle your jet and bring it in for you?"

He must have stopped laughing, because he clearly heard the words. Slowly, and with a more normal intake of oxygen clearing his head, gave the Traffic Control voice the go-ahead on bringing him in, then sat back and for the first time in many hours, relaxed.

He had broken the tension. And in an irrational way it had not been dangerous, uncontrollable laughter. Perhaps there had been a large touch of hysteria in it, but it had been the optimistic hysteria of a happy man realising, for the first time, that he knew what he was doing and where he was going, and above all—why.

To be continued

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Dear John,

The two letters in *New Worlds* No. 29 prompt me to suggest that a regular critical forum be included in the magazine; I feel sure that similar serious and informed criticism would benefit all science-fiction writers and ultimately help raise the general level of the medium. I hope you will be able to introduce something of the sort and, to keep the ball rolling, I append a few thoughts on Wilson Tucker's *Wild Talent*.

I found the first part of this serial slow and the last part unsatisfying because the author avoided all the problems he set up by introducing telepaths into our present form of society. The middle section was admirably done, thought-provoking and completely satisfying.

Now, a professional writer should have little difficulty in constructing a dramatic opening or inventing a rousing climax: what usually happens is that the middle tends to sag under the weight of explanatory material, build-up for the climax, and general development. Tucker appears to have reversed the process; I don't see how, but it's something to think about.

Sydney J. Bounds,
Kingston-on-Thames, Surrey.

Continued on Page 128

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Dear Alfred Bester,

You are right about the British author not trying too hard to supply a surprise ending. And it *is* deliberate, there *is* a point, as you suspect.

Now, Alfred, do you think we could outsmart you? That's just the trouble—the intelligent, experienced, sophisticated reader is not going to be beaten by fair means, and no writer of integrity wants to resort to foul means to do it. (There actually is a play in which we see more and more clearly that *nobody* we know could have committed a certain murder, and in the last few minutes a new character appears from Australia and says he committed the crime).

I am not just flattering you. It is a long time since any science fiction writer, British or American, outsmarted me either, fairly. If I haven't seen his solution coming it is generally because he hasn't given me a fair chance or because the solution isn't very good, anyway.

What makes great literature? One of the many answers to this has to be wide appeal. Great literature isn't what a few people like very much. If a thing is admitted to be great it is because a lot of people have liked it. So there is no point in anyone writing a brilliant, highly devious story which supplies all the necessary clues and yet achieves a really satisfying surprise ending, if only people of IQ 130 or over can understand it. (On the Moray House scale only 2% of the population are over 130). Any surprise-ending story runs the risk of appealing only to people of a certain level of intelligence and reading experience—below, it is incomprehensible; above, it is obnoxious.

On the other hand, if an author can succeed in stating his theme, working out his open, obvious plan, at the same time retaining the reader's interest in his development of the story elements, he has done something a little more difficult than outsmarting his readers and may have produced something really good. That's just it—if he fails in keeping your interest, he has bitten off more than he can chew and his method looks suspect. But it is not his technique which has failed—it is his talent. He has written a not-very-good story, which doesn't in any way indicate that somebody else won't be able to use this technique with greater success.

One other point—there is a great difference between a surprise ending and a twist (not that I am suggesting you don't know that, Alfred). Working to an agreed conclusion by no means precludes a neat twist at the end. Hundreds of O. Henry's stories pack no surprise at all—the general lines of the conclusion have been obvious for some time, but that doesn't stop O. Henry handing out quite a shock in the way it comes out.

J. T. McIntosh,
Aberdeen.

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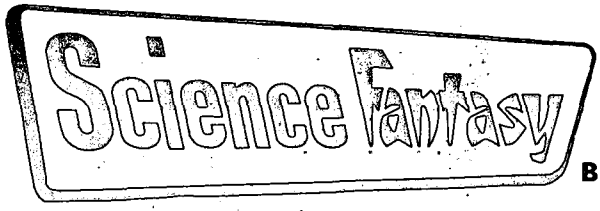

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